UNDERSTANDING MUSEUM VISITORS'

EXPERIENCE OF PAINTINGS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF

ADULT NON-ART SPECIALISTS

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Abstract

This study is an inquiry into museum visitors' experience of paintings and, in particular, the experience of adult non-art specialists. Phenomenology, a form of inquiry that seeks to articulate lived experience, provides the philosophical and methodological framework for the study. From phenomenological interviews carried out with eight participants, descriptions and themes of the experience were generated. These themes were categorized into two major areas: the articulated aspects and the non-articulated aspects. The former refers to aspects that people can articulate when they describe their experience. For example, they talk about the formal qualities of paintings, related textual information, their daily experiences, the painter, and the museum environment. The latter refers to aspects that people cannot articulate. For example, they have difficulties in expressing their feelings, their relationship with time, and an understanding of the role of the body.

I argue that the experience of paintings of non-art specialist museum visitors is an embodied experience, during which individuals engage themselves in various visual aspects of paintings, make connections to their personal life, reflect on themselves, their relations with others, and the world. We should understand that people are likely to connect the experience to their everyday world. Instead of focusing exclusively on information, knowledge or formal qualities, museum educators and teachers should create opportunities for visitors and students to make personal connections with paintings, so as to make the encounter personally meaningful. We should also aware that people may respond in a way reflecting many ideas of Modernism and Expressionism. School teachers and teacher-educators, in particular, should develop a critical mind of their students towards these two influencing thoughts and to engage students in exploring paintings from dimensions other than the aesthetic. The inarticulateness of museum visitors also provides insights into certain overlooked features of the experience: the embodied nature of the experience, the way time is experienced and the viewer's feelings about paintings.

Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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1.1 Introduction

Thomas

I am moved. I am definitely moved by the painting that stands in front of me. It is a painting by Jackson Pollock. [Only later did I discover that it was called *The Deep* and that it was painted in 1953.] I have a feeling that I have finally found it. Yes, this is it. This is the painting. I am not anticipating that I will find anything, yet I find something. It is difficult to tell what I have found, but I have such a feeling. ... I first caught sight of *it* when I entered one of the rooms. All of a sudden, a gust of cold feeling extended all over me. But that coldness is different from what I experience in the winter, under a fan or in front of an air-conditioner. It is something that comes out from the inside of my body. I begin to tremble but I soon regain control over myself. ... I have a sense that I have been brought back to where life begins. It is as if I am witnessing the birth of the universe, where the most basic substances of the world are composing themselves. It reminds me of some abstract Chinese ink paintings. They are so similar, but also so different.

(The researcher's own experience in the Tate Gallery, 1999)

Douglas

My first shock of "discovery" of its incalculable importance came when I saw it standing amid the bomb-damaged marble and elaborate plasterwork décor of the great hall in the erstwhile Royal Palace in Milan alongside the Duomo.

...

In that melancholy, but once grand décor, *Guernica*, carried out in black, white and grey exclusively, dominated the scene by its horrifying and forceful presence. For the first time, I saw it as an overwhelming pictorial achievement, as a picture rooted in more traditions than one. It had both a contemporary and an eternal significance, and was executed in an expressive formal language invented by Picasso. It was then that I first saw clearly the classical nature of the composition, and became aware of its indebtedness to Poussin. Expressionist distortions of forms, movement and gesture are used here to evoke human tragedy, ...

(Art historian and critic, Douglas Cooper, shares his recollection of *Guernica* in various settings, Cooper 1988: 322)

Salvador

From my seat I could see only two of them distinctly: one represented a fox's head emerging from a cavern, carrying a dead goose dangling from its jaws; the other was a copy of Millet's *Angelus*. This painting produced in me an obscure anguish, so poignant that the memory of those two motionless silhouettes pursued me for several years with the constant uneasiness provoked by their continual and ambiguous presence. But this uneasiness was not "all". In spite of these feelings that the *Angelus* aroused in me I had a sense of being somewhat under their protection and a secret and refined pleasure shone in the depth of my fear like a little silvery knife blade gleaming in sunlight.

(Surrealist painter, Dali, 1942/1993: 64)

Paul

But at the end of the war I still had never seen the original paintings in all their glory. Going to Berlin, I hurried to the Kaiser Friederich Museum. There on the wall was a picture that had comforted me in battle, *Madonna with Singing Angels*, painted by Sandro Botticelli in the fifteenth century.

Gazing up at it, I felt a state approaching ecstasy. In the beauty of the painting there was Beauty itself. It shone through the colors of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church.

As I stood there, bathed in the beauty its painter had envisioned so long ago, something of the divine source of all things came through to me. I turned away shaken.

That moment has affected my whole life, given me the keys for the interpretation of human existence, brought vital joy and spiritual truth. I compare it with what is usually called revelation in the language of religion. I know that no artistic experience can match the moments in which prophets were grasped in the power of the Divine Presence, but I believe there is an analogy between revelation and what I felt. In both cases, the experience goes beyond the way we encounter reality in our daily lives. It opens up depths experienced in no other way.

I know now that the picture is not the greatest. I have seen greater since then. But that moment of ecstasy has never been repeated.

(Priest and a theology philosopher Paul Tillich's account of 'One Moment of Beauty', Tillich 1987: 234-235)

John

The painted lilac tree is both more precise and more vague than any painting you have seen before. … Given the precision and the vagueness, you are forced to re-see the lilacs of your own experience. The precision triggers your visual memory, while the vagueness welcomes and accommodates your memory when it comes. More than that, the uncovered memory of your sense of sight is so acutely evoked, that other appropriate memories of other senses – scent, warmth, dampness, the texture of a dress, the length of an afternoon – are also extracted from the past. … You fall through a kind of whirlpool of sense memories towards an ever receding moment of pleasure, which is a moment of total re-cognition.

The intensity of this experience can be hallucinating. The fall into and towards the past with its mounting excitement, which at the same time, is the mirror-opposite of expectation for it is a return, a withdrawal, has something about it which is comparable with an orgasm. Finally everything is simultaneous with and indivisible from the mauve fire of the lilac.
(Art critic John Berger talks about his experience of two paintings by Monet: *Lilacs, Grey Weather*, 1872 and *Lilacs in the Sun*, 1872, Berger 1993: 192-193)

Joyce
In a wall painting exhibition at the Smith College Museum of Art in 1990, *To Soar II*, dancing and flying figures of women were placed at the top of the wall compelling me to stretch my body in order to see them; raped and tortured bodies of women were placed in corners near the floor so that I was forced to crouch in order to fully engage them. In other examples, figures are painted on skylights and ceilings, and in *Masha Bruskina* (1993), cut off bodies of women sink into oblivion at the bottom edge of the wall. *My physical responses in relation to the placement of her figures are embodiments of meaning.*
(Studio art professor, Brodsky, 2002: 99, italics in original)

The above descriptions illustrate possible ways of experiencing paintings. People of different ages, cultures and art-making backgrounds have described their experiences of paintings. Although the contexts of these descriptions vary, all of them are first-person accounts which help us better understand people's experience of paintings. I had a sense of *discovery*. I did not know what exactly I had found, but insisted that I had found something. Douglas Cooper connected with his *knowledge* of pictorial composition, visual language, artists and styles. The feeling of *continuity* was pronounced in the case of Salvador Dali. He was haunted by Millet's *Angelus* for several years. Paul Tillich claimed that he was affected by Botticelli's *Madonna* for the rest of his life in his understanding of human existence. He compared his experience to the religious experience of *revelation*. The lilacs in the paintings by Monet awakened in John Berger not only his sense of sight, but also his senses of smell, touch and time. It would seem from Berger's account that paintings appeal not only to the visual sense, but also to other senses, triggering what is sometimes called *sensory transfer*. Joyce Brodsky's experience

of paintings is a *whole body* experience. She is consciously aware of how her body is involved in looking at paintings in a museum.

The above discussion illustrates some aspects of how people experience paintings. Themes such as 'discovery', 'knowledge', 'continuity', 'revelation', 'sensory transfer' and 'embodiment' emerge from the accounts. It is obvious that these descriptions are given by individuals who are well acquainted with paintings: an art teacher-educator, an art historian, an art critic, an artist, an art theorist and a studio art professor. To these people, their experiences of paintings are often heightened emotional experiences, in which they are totally absorbed in a kind of contemplative pleasure. Overall, the various perspectives addressed by previous theoretical and empirical research on the experience of paintings tend to portray specialized experiences (e.g., Abbs 1994; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990; Hargreaves 1983; Taylor 1986). These are usually experiences of people professionally trained in art or related disciplines experiencing paintings of excellent quality. But what is it like when people who have no specialized training in art experience paintings in a museum?

A 64-year-old visitor

For me, the most evocative painting in the AGO [Art Gallery of Ontario] is the West Wind. I come to see it regularly because I am immediately transported back to my childhood and early teens and the pleasures of childhood summer holidays on the shores of Georgian Bay. All the paintings in the Group of Seven speak to me of my Canadianism, but it is the West Wind that speaks to my heart. – I am 64 years old and live in London, Ontario.

(A visitor's written response to *The West Wind* by Tom Thomson at the AGO, in Worts 1995: 208)

A 17-year-old high school student

Vivid colours and bold strokes bring out the relentless cycle of life, emphasizing destruction and, at the same time, rebirth. The piece brought back a stream of memories relating back to a near-death experience I had while in Algonquin Park, along with the soothing sounds and smells associated with nature. I am 17

years old and am a student from Unionville High School. I am originally from Pakistan and have lived in Toronto for 7 years to date.

(A visitor's written response to exhibits at the AGO, in Worts 1995: 210)

A dialogue between students and a museum educator

Educator: First I want you to look at a large painting titled *Goliath* by Hans Hofmann, a German/American painter who donated a large collection of his paintings to this museum in the early sixties. Place yourself in front of the painting and try to find an appropriate viewing distance that is not too close and not too distant. Then just relax and look. Keep on looking for some time. What do you see?

Student: Lots of bright colors. Some are shaped in rectangular squares, others are painted spontaneously, without shape.

E: What else?

S: It looks like the colored squares are floating in space in front of the background.

E: How?

S: They are moving, sometimes they come toward us, sometimes they recede. Some seem closer to us than others, but they're all constantly moving.

E: How is it to look at?

S: At first I found the colors very pleasant, but now when I concentrate on the squares and see them moving I get sort of dizzy.

...

E: Does it do anything to you?

S: It makes my heart beat faster.

E: Does it remind you of situations in daily life?

S: To some degree, yes. When somebody is sitting in front of you, like in the cinema, and you can't see anything because of their fat head.

S: It's like seeing two movies at the same time.

E: Do you recognize similar experiences from your own life?

S: When my neighbor plays really loud music and I have to concentrate on my homework.

(Excerpt from a gallery talk between first-year students at the University of California and a museum educator, in Funch 1993: 91)

Lorna

Pissarro – it's beside a river and boats tied up and people on the dock, – that's kind of nice ... it's not so extraordinary: it's just that for some reason it stuck in my head ... I don't go back for any fancy artistic reason ... I go back because I know it and I feel comfortable; as I say, an old friend ... I think it gives you a sense of security.

...

My God, you have personal tragedies – everybody does – maybe you have a bad day and you come and you

look at that ... you can come in here and think, well, you know, these things may go on in life, but some things never change ... To talk about it is trite, but to feel it is not trite, because it's worthwhile, ... coming in just to see it.

(Excerpt from an interview with a retired secretary and schoolteacher who talked about Pissarro' s *The Harbour at Rouen* and Lawren Harris' *Mount Temple*, in Montgomery-Whicher 1987: 81-82)

Megan

The paintings are not beautiful. It is the light in them that is overwhelmingly beautiful. I look at these paintings and ask: "how *does* he do that?" ... the next room was a study in the light present in storms lashing open fields and roads, and three or four paintings of the fires in eastern Washington a few years ago, the light in the fire being the subject. These paintings are dark, grey, wet, foggy. They look like the wet, charcoal grey days all too familiar in Northwest winters, and make you grab metaphorically for the gore-tex jacket. The light in the storm pictures is present yet subtle. If the light on the mason jars is focused, laser beam-sharp, the light in these pictures is diffused, hopeful, wanting to be, but uncertain. I am reminded of how Northwesterners look at grey wet skies and say, hopefully, "look it's lightening up." We have a finely nuanced range of greys that substitutes white grey for sun yellow in our winter psyches, allowing our sun-starved souls to be satisfied with the high, white grey of a wispy overcast, and not the clear, sky blues and yellows of a New England winter day.

(A diary written after a museum visit by a retired historian, in Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson 2002: 108-109)

Both the 64- and 17-year-old Ontario Gallery visitors were taken back to some of their most important past experiences. The older man was reminded of pleasurable childhood memories, while the teenage student recalled his horrifying near-death experience. *Reflections* of the past are prominent in both cases and both visitors seemed to *relive* some of their past when looking at the paintings. The dialogue between the students and the museum educator shows that our responses to paintings are not necessarily linked only to dramatic experiences, but may also be connected to our *ordinary* experiences. Lorna described her experience as a return to an old friend. A sense of *familiarity* associated with feelings of comfort and stability has been evoked. Megan associated the light of the paintings with the grey skies of the Northwestern winters. It was a connection to her *everyday* experience. A preliminary analysis of lived experience accounts from art

specialists and non-art specialists show that those of the latter are often dominated by connections to personal life experiences. Despite the number and variety of studies and discourses pertaining to museum visitors' experience of paintings or works of art (e.g., Clarkson and Worts 2005; Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2001; Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2001; Housen 1992; Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson 2002; Linko 2003; Weltzl-Fairchild, Dufresne-Tassé and Dube 1997), few studies have examined the meanings of such an experience as an authentic lived experience of people without a specialist training in art from a phenomenological perspective. This is precisely what I wish to accomplish in the present study.

My life has been filled with experiences of works of art in museums[1], especially paintings and ceramics. Since I was very young, I have been attracted to making and drawing, activities that I will continue as a practising artist throughout my life. Being a teacher of art for more than twenty years and currently involved in the preparation of school art teachers, I am deeply interested in how we experience paintings in museums. I often take my students to museums and start teaching using themes derived from a few related paintings. I am especially interested in the experience of museum visitors who do not know much about art history or art theories, for most of my students and their students belong to this category. What is it like for people who have no specialist training in art to experience paintings in a museum? What does such an experience mean to these people?

I am particularly fascinated by the ways in which museum visitors look at paintings and

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[1] The term 'museum' in this study refers to public, independent or private institutions devoted mainly to the collection and exhibition of works of art. In the United Kingdom and Canada, 'gallery' – rather than 'museum' – is the term usually used. The term 'museum' used in this study is inclusive of the meaning 'gallery'.

talk about them. As a docent of the Hong Kong Museum of Art since 1996, I have plenty of opportunities to observe museum visitors. Some walk hastily through a museum, stopping in front of a painting for less than a minute, while others shuffle from one painting to another and pause at every painting they come across. Some visitors walk very close to a painting; they read every line of the caption and look at the painting again and then back at the caption; it seems that they are performing a kind of comparison or examination. Some people appear to look without a particular orientation and just glance all over the gallery, but some seem to know exactly what they want to see and go straight to a specific work. Some will make notes or sketches while they look but many more just gaze solemnly and silently and sometimes they frown. Some visitors go to the museum with their friends or family. I can hear them whispering comments to each other and occasionally chuckling. But what exactly happens to museum visitors' minds, as well as to their bodies, when they are looking at paintings? What do they see, think and feel? Are such experiences 'aesthetic experience', a term commonly found in art textbooks and used by the media? It is from such questions that the present study has taken shape.

1.2 Research title, focus and rationale

The title of the present research is:

Understanding museum visitors' experience of paintings: a phenomenological study of adult non-art specialists.

The present study is concerned with people's experience of paintings in a museum. More

specifically, the study seeks to articulate what it is like for adults who have no specialist training in art to experience paintings. By specialist training, I mean an education in visual arts or related fields to degree level or above. The aim of the study is to understand the experience of paintings in a museum from the point of view of the experiencing person. Eight people, without specialist art backgrounds and who do not work in art-related professions, were interviewed for this study.

In order to articulate the research focus, I need to define what I mean by the phrase 'museum visitors' experience of paintings'. Briefly, 'museum visitors' experience of paintings' refers to the variety of experiences that people may have when looking at paintings in a museum. What may occur? To use a few descriptive terms, they may feel interested, inspired, joyful, fascinated, amazed, moved, stimulated, bored, puzzled, antagonized, disturbed, provoked, repulsed or a combination of these. There seems to be virtually no end to this list. But what do these descriptions actually *mean*? Some people would use a more specialized term: 'aesthetic experience', to refer to the experience of paintings, emphasizing its aesthetic nature on the one hand, and its differentiation from ordinary experience on the other. This leads us to ask, 'What kind of an experience is an aesthetic experience?' According to Coleman, this is a problematic question, for it implies 'that there is only one kind of aesthetic experience' (1983: 11). Is there just one kind of aesthetic experience? Are there other kinds of meaningful experiences besides 'aesthetic experience' that occur when people come face to face with paintings in a museum?

In this study, I elect to use the term 'museum visitors' experience of paintings' (or 'the experience of paintings'), since it is clear, precise, and independent of the many

established preconceptions. It is also quite distinct from the term 'aesthetic experience'. (The distinction between the two terms will be discussed further in chapter two.) Lachapelle (1999) also uses the term 'experience of works of art', instead of 'aesthetic experience', in his investigation of the responses of expert and non-expert viewers during their visits to an art museum. I would like to limit the scope of this study to museum visitors' experiences associated with paintings – the art form that most participants talked about when I began interviewing people about their experience in a museum. By paintings, I mean two-dimensional works created by people purposefully through 'the application of colour, pigment, or paint to surfaces' (Dictionary of the Arts 1994: 392). 'Museums' in this study refers to art museums and galleries, with most of their collections and exhibitions devoted to visual art objects.

Previous scholarship and research into people's experience of paintings focuses almost exclusively on the portrayal of 'successful' experience or 'expert viewing' (Housen 2001: 2): that is, on the experiences of people trained in art-related disciplines. These experiences are characterized by total absorption, heightened feeling and great joy (e.g., Abbs 1994; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990; Funch 1997; Hargreaves 1983; Taylor 1986). The implication is that only the experiences of expert viewers are legitimate, and these experiences become the models that we attempt to emulate, or the goals which we try to attain. However, I argue that it is important to understand how non-specialists, that is, people with an 'ordinary' artistic background, experience paintings. After all, they greatly outnumber people with expert artistic knowledge and it should be of interest to art educators and museum educators to understand their experiences. Contributing new knowledge to an under-researched field, the study will widen our scope of understanding of the phenomenon by extending our concern to the non-specialist. As a teacher, I have

worked with children and adults who know little about paintings. It is their experiences that concern and interest me. Their experiences are important if we want to create an environment that facilitates learning about art and understanding paintings for art museum visitors, the majority of whom do not have specialist art training. Also, as a museum docent, it is with people who have no specialist art training that I have the most contact.

Since the study is concerned with how museum visitors experience paintings, I have therefore approached people who have had such experiences. In other words, I have searched for people who are *experienced.* It would be futile to look for experiences of paintings on the part of people who never visit a museum, who have no interest in painting or who do not value art at all. Therefore, an important attribute of the participants in this study is that they are interested in paintings but are not art specialists. They visit exhibitions of paintings, enrol as voluntary museum docents or participate in classes on various art-making disciplines as a hobby. Although this group of people has been less studied (Housen 2001), they represent a substantial proportion of those who visit museums regularly.

Eight non-art specialists with different personal backgrounds were selected as participants for this study. The small number of participants enables me to carry out an in-depth, contextualized study of their experiences, with an emphasis on the background of the participant, the experience and the complex interactions between the viewer and the painting. The focus of the study has been determined in response to the apparent bias towards studying the experience of expert viewers (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990). Some empirical studies have focused on particular aspects of the experience, such

as emotions and feelings (e.g., Linko 2003; Stylianides 2003), aesthetic development (e.g., Housen 2001; Weltzel-Fairchild 1991), cognition (Émond 2005; Lachapelle, Murray, and Neim 2003; Leinhardt, Tittle, and Knutson 2002), the kinds of satisfaction derived from the experience (e.g., Pekarik, Doering, and Karns 1999) and visitors' interpretive strategies (Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2001; Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2001). However, none of these studies addresses the problem from a phenomenological perspective, nor does any of them focus on the experience of non-art specialists. For this study, in-depth interviews have been carried out to explore both the participants' past experiences of paintings in a museum, and some of their more recent encounters. Most of the participants visited the Hong Kong Museum of Art and talked about their experience of particular paintings there.

1.3 Research aims and questions

The study aims to:

1. Articulate what it is like for adults who have no specialist training in art to experience paintings in a museum.
2. Achieve a deeper understanding of the lived meanings of non-art specialist adults' experience of paintings in a museum: in particular,
   a) to show how they find meaning in their experience by relating it to their other lived experiences;
   b) to explore meaningful experiences other than 'aesthetic experience' found in people's encounters with paintings.

3. Make relevant suggestions to museum educators and art educators.

Specifically, the present study aims to answer the following questions pertaining to lived experience and lived meaning:

1. What is it like for people who have no specialist training in art to experience paintings in a museum?
2. What does such an experience mean to these people?

1.4 Research methodology

Phenomenology, emphasizing the lived meaning of embodied experience, is the methodology used for this study. It has been chosen for its ability to capture the immediacy and subjectivity of experience. Phenomenology, in particular hermeneutic phenomenology, does not claim to provide universal explanations. Instead, phenomenology offers insightful descriptions of experience, articulating important aspects or themes of the phenomenon. The validity of a phenomenological study lies in its capability to generate sympathetic thought or agreement from the readers, as well as in its rigour and in the appropriateness of the procedures used to collect and analyse data.

I chose phenomenology as the guiding principle, philosophically and methodologically, in the formulation of the present study for a number of reasons. Epistemologically speaking, phenomenology investigates human experience and regards experience as a source of knowledge. Ontologically speaking, phenomenology views every human

experience as unique and contextual in nature, thus allowing me to study museum visitors' experience of paintings in context. The methodology is capable of producing fuller, contextualized descriptions, showing how individuals, each having his or her own history and interests, experience paintings in a museum.

Unlike the Cartesian view that the mind is independent of the body and the external world, phenomenology maintains that mind and body co-constitute each other as an inseparable unity. The methodology approaches human experience as a total experience involving the viewer's mind and body, affective and cognitive faculties, and feeling and understanding, with an emphasis on the reciprocity of various elements. Thus, phenomenology is appropriate for this study, which aims to understand the complex interplay between the person, the painting and the world.

The phenomenological emphasis on the situatedness of human experience is helpful in enabling us to obtain an understanding of the connection between museum visitors' experience and their other lived experiences. Instead of seeing the experience as an isolated, momentary phenomenon, the methodology allows an examination of the relevance of such an experience to various aspects of living and the ways in which the experience is meaningful to personal life. The methodology is sensitive to the context of the experience, taking into consideration the viewers' personal contribution and orientation in the encounter.

The descriptive and interpretative nature of phenomenology also makes it a suitable methodology for this study, which seeks to understand, rather than to explain, the phenomenon, and to provide interpretations of possible instances rather than univocal

theories. I have not attempted to predict, measure or experiment, but to listen, describe, contextualize, understand and interpret. I have listened to the experiences of those museum visitors whose voices are seldom heard. I have attempted to describe the phenomenon under study as a lived experience that is rooted in the everyday world and connected to meaningful life experiences. I have also endeavoured to understand the phenomenon as experienced by people without specialist art training. Having achieved a deeper understanding of this experience, I shall be in a position to make suggestions and help in bringing about improvements to the practices related to it.

In order to respond to the research questions, I conducted multiple interviews with the participants in the study. Interviews were transcribed, and subsequently descriptions of participants' experiences were constructed and common themes underlying the experience were developed. When working on these descriptions and themes, I have employed specific phenomenological perspectives, as well as referring to the existing literature on the experience to interpret participants' experiences. In the conclusion, I have shown how this study contributes to understanding the experience as a whole, and discussed the implications for art education and museum education in particular.

1.5 Assumptions, significance and value of the study

There are many occasions on which people come into contact with paintings. We may see paintings, painted surfaces or reproductions of these in private places where we live and rest, or in public places where we learn, work, play, shop, travel or worship. We also see

paintings in many different forms. A painting may be an original in a museum, a replica in a shop, a reproduction in an art book, a slide image on a screen or an electronic image on a computer. However, the present study focuses on people's experience of original paintings found in museums.

From a personal, pedagogical perspective, the experience of original paintings in a museum is the situation most relevant to my profession as an art teacher-educator and to my service as a museum docent. It is important for me to understand the lived meanings of experiencing original paintings in museums, rather than paintings found in other locations or paintings which exist in other forms, since such a focus allows me to investigate what I believe to be a meaningful and pedagogically significant experience.

This study is based on the assumption that museum visitors' experience of paintings is meaningful in its own right. Museum visitors' experience of paintings has been described as a 'sensuous' (Dufrenne 1987: 139) and immediate experience in the context of an increasingly technocratic society (Bersson 1982; Madenfort 1975; Tsugawa 1968). Smith (1989) suggests that experiencing paintings is capable of stimulating and expanding the power of percipience, of promoting understanding, of clarifying human experience, and of bringing intrinsic gratification and rewards. Shusterman notes that in a technological world where the dominant culture is scientific, the experience of an original work of art will have a therapeutic effect on our minds (2000: 11). Rather than offering 'the quantifiable certainties of technologised culture', the experience of works of art embodies 'a disclosive knowledge of our culture, of our placedness, of what it is to be human and of our innermost selves' (Davey 1994: 80). By drawing attention to the lived experience of paintings, this study will reinstate the importance of experiencing paintings, an

experience which, I believe, *should* remain part of our everyday life. I hope this study will be of interest not only to schoolteachers, art educators or museum professionals, but also to people who value human experience, who seek an understanding of human life, and who are concerned about the quality of human existence.

By describing the nature and meanings of museum visitors' lived experience of paintings, this study will contribute to a fuller and better understanding of the phenomenon. Such understanding will benefit art education and museum practice in at least three ways. First, the study will sharpen our understanding of the experience, something which is essential in order to be able to engage in informed discussions about the experience. Second, it is from such an improved understanding that we might be able to go one step further in creating an environment and a pedagogy that facilitates the experience for people at different levels of education. I believe that an understanding of the experience will have significant impacts on the teaching and learning of art. The third way in which the present study may contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in art is more subtle. As an art teacher-educator myself, I shall share my findings with my students and initiate improvements in my own teaching. The impact of the study will be realized through art teachers. If we accept that persons who have enjoyed paintings in museums, who see the experience as meaningful, and who have matured as a result of these experiences, are in a better position to share and facilitate such museum experience with students, then this study is a valuable study.

Over the past thirty years, it has been found that art curricula in Hong Kong were centred principally on production activities, with an obvious neglect of appreciation and criticism (Ma 2000). However, recent developments in art education (e.g.,

Discipline-Based-Art-Education in the United States; Critical Studies in Britain; Studies of Visual Culture that have taken shape in many countries) have marked a clear shift from studio-based learning to a more balanced emphasis on responding as well as making. In current art education discourse, it is generally agreed that art education should provide students with opportunities to develop their creative skills and at the same time their ability to understand and criticize art. Instead of focusing solely on knowing and making, *experiencing* works of art and our immediate and extended environments should remain an important area within art education (Curriculum Development Council 2003). This study will not prescribe ways to teach appreciation or formulate rules for provoking meaningful experiences with paintings, but will contribute by providing a solid understanding of people's experience of paintings in a museum, an experience that is an intrinsic part of the process of making, seeing, talking and writing about paintings.

From another perspective, the study is valuable for its focus on some of the neglected aspects of museum visitors' experience of paintings. One focus of the present study is on recovering some of the phenomenological importance of people's experience of paintings in a museum. Instead of conceptualizing the experience theoretically and studying the phenomenon as an intellectual abstraction, this study provides an opportunity for educators to understand the experience from concrete examples derived from lived experience. By considering aspects other than the aesthetic, the study addresses museum visitors' experience of paintings as a holistic experience and brings about a broader understanding of the experience. By focusing on the experience of people who do not have specialist training in art, the study addresses the experience of people who are in fact in the majority, but who at the same time have so far been largely unstudied by researchers (Housen 2001).

1.6 The cultural and language context of the study

The present study is formulated within the Western tradition of philosophy and aesthetics. However, the fieldwork has been carried out for the most part in my native country – Hong Kong, a place where East meets West. The situation in Hong Kong requires some explanation. Hong Kong people, including all the participants in this study and myself, have been educated in a system which, to a large extent, is based on the Western model. British rule, which lasted for more than 150 years, has already established the Western influence in every walk of life, especially in the infrastructure of society. The strongest evidence of influence from traditional Chinese culture is found in the family values we have, the religion we practise, the language we speak and the food we eat. The way that people think in Hong Kong is not very different from the way people living in any cosmopolitan and commercial city think. Some people like to describe Hong Kong people as hard-working, practical and flexible. However, such a description applies to a great many other people around the world. Perhaps one thing that is worth mentioning is that there is a common perception that Hong Kong people are not very 'cultured'; only people who come from certain social and educational backgrounds will enjoy cultural activities such as going to museums, theatres and concerts (Ng 2000). But is not this phenomenon also commonly found in many countries around the world? The Hong Kong context, with its hybrid of Chinese, Asian and Western cultures, is the unique background of the study.

As in many parts of the world, art/art and craft/art and design is a subject in the formal curriculum of kindergartens, schools and universities in Hong Kong. However, it is never as highly esteemed as the sciences, languages, medicine or law. Most children in Hong

Kong study art up to junior secondary school level (age fifteen) and approximately 5-6% of them continue taking art until the end of secondary school (Chan 1999). All secondary school art teachers are trained subject-specifically, while only a small proportion of primary art teachers are trained in art[2]. Within the school context, students are introduced largely to artworks of the Western world (Ng 2000), although schools have begun to pay more and more attention to Chinese art during recent years. Society's negligent attitude towards art is generally reflected in the increasing marginalization of cultural subjects such as art and music in the school curriculum (Morris 1996: 106). The situation is further aggravated by the overemphasis on practical art activities in Hong Kong schools and the often linear and fact-learning methods of teaching art history and appreciation at some senior levels.

People in Hong Kong learn Chinese and English from birth. Therefore educated people in Hong Kong are bilingual. They have no major difficulty in understanding written English, as most tertiary education is conducted in English. All the participants in the present study were interviewed in Chinese[3] (except one). However, I transcribed the interviews, wrote descriptions and developed themes in English. The transcribed interviews are not therefore in the exact words used by the participants, but are translations, although I did attempt to remain faithful to the original meanings and to keep the content and form of the speech as accurate and intact as possible. Translation

[2] Most secondary school art teachers in Hong Kong, in particular the head of department, are specialist art teachers: that is, they teach mainly art but may also teach some lessons in other subjects. Most primary school art teachers have to teach one or two other subjects in addition to art. It is fairly common that they have four to eight art lessons out of thirty lessons in a week.

[3] Native Hong Kong people speak Cantonese in daily conversation. Cantonese is a dialect and for the most part is a colloquial language. When people write, they write in Chinese. Therefore, the conversations that actually took place during the interviews were in Cantonese.

nevertheless does involve a certain amount of interpretation. The participants' understanding of the transcribed and translated interviews and themes was not a problem and every measure was taken to ensure that the text reflected the participants' meanings. These measures will be described in more detail in chapter seven, which deals with research methods and procedures.

1.7 Summary

The present study is a study of non-art specialist adults' experience of paintings in a museum. It aims, on the one hand, to extend our understanding of people's experience of paintings in a museum by examining the experiences of non-art specialists, and on the other, to deepen our understanding by placing the experience in the context of the experiencing person. In this way, the study attempts to fill a gap in the research and philosophical literature in which the experience of paintings has usually been described as the heightened experience of a few qualified individuals. This study adopts a phenomenological methodology, emphasizing lived experience and lived meaning. The study will offer a deeper understanding of the experience through phenomenological research and writing and will offer insights to people who work in the fields of art education and museum education.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature – The Context

2.1 Introduction to the four literature review chapters

This chapter, together with chapters three, four and five, presents a review of literature which is concerned with museum visitors' experience of paintings. As such an experience is often referred to as an aesthetic experience, the review will present a discussion of the experience in general, and deal with the aesthetic aspect of the experience in particular sections. There exists a rich array of related yet diverse concepts concerning the experience of paintings: modernist and postmodernist theories of aesthetics, form and expression, perception and interpretation, disinterestedness and empathy, and pleasure and cognition. All of these concepts are central to an understanding of our experience of paintings; they do, however, often contradict each other. The following review is therefore designed to clarify the meaning of these concepts and the relationships between them. The aesthetic dimension of the experience will form a substantial part of the review, and will be elucidated by means of discussions of the psychological, philosophical, intellectual and sociological dimensions of the experience. The present review is not exhaustive, the aim being to build up the knowledge base for this study and to demonstrate the need to address some of the neglected dimensions of the experience.

To many philosophers of the analytic tradition (e.g., Beardsley, Sibley) and their heirs, such as theorists of formalist modernism (e.g., Bell, Fry, Greenberg), museum visitors' experience of paintings is an aesthetic experience, which focuses mainly on the visual

aspects of paintings. They believe that aesthetic experience is a distinctive kind of experience in which people encounter objects or phenomena that manifest aesthetic qualities. To them, aesthetic experience involves looking at visual art objects, and looking is a matter of pure vision. However, such a view neglects many aspects other than the physical perception or visualization of objects. I have thus chosen to use the phrase 'the experience of paintings', rather than 'looking at paintings' or 'aesthetic experience' in all the chapters. 'Experience' is a more encompassing term, for it implies the involvement of all the faculties of the experiencing individual, including body, heart and mind. The term 'aesthetic experience' is too limiting, as Dickie (1985) points out:

> We must give up equating proper experience of all works of art with the aesthetic experience of them, if we mean by "aesthetic experience" that it is disinterested or detached experience. ... I think the best thing to do is give up using the term "aesthetic experience" as the generic term for the experience of art. It is best, I think, simply to use the term, "the experience of art" for the experience of art. This neutral way of speaking does not dictate that certain aspects of certain works of art are not proper candidates for experiencing when one looks at, listens to, attends to, etc., those works. With this neutral way of speaking, we are free to describe our experiences of art as they actually occur. (Dickie 1985: 14)

More recently, Carroll (2001) also writes:

> Different artworks ask for or mandate or prescribe many different kinds of responses, whose appropriateness is best assessed on a case-by-case basis. To attempt to call them aesthetic experiences or to reserve that label for only the best of them simply courts confusion and even, unfortunately, rancor. (Carroll 2001: 61).

The meaning of the term 'aesthetic experience' has been complicated by all sorts of 'prejudices', 'resistances', 'suspicion', and 'connotations' (Maclagan 2001: 9) and it means different things to different people. Some people use it to refer to, in a general sense, an experience of a work of art or an experience of natural beauty. Others, especially writers from the modernist or analytic tradition, use it to mean a special kind of elevated experience. For theorists such as John Dewey, it refers to a quality found in all

meaningful experiences. Throughout this review, the phrase 'museum visitors' experience of paintings' or 'the experience of paintings' will be used to refer to people experiencing paintings in a museum, whereas the term 'aesthetic experience' will be used to refer to the special, elevated type of experience described above.

The literature review approaches museum visitors' experience of paintings in four focused areas, each in a separate chapter. These are the context (chapter two), the object (chapter three), the viewer (chapter four), and the value (chapter five). Only if there is a viewer – a museum visitor, and an object – a painting, will an experience occur. It is the many possible interactions between the museum visitor and the painting that constitute the experience. The context: for example, a museum or the wider environment in which these interactions take place, is also important, for it affects how the experience is formed and discussed. Last but not least, the different ways in which people think that the experience contributes to human life are reflections of how people conceptualize that experience.

Museum visitors' experience of paintings is such a complex phenomenon that to focus solely on one perspective would be to neglect other perspectives. Inseparability is in fact a characteristic of human experience (Crowther 1993). However, I hope that the identification of the four areas described above will provide a framework and a sense of direction to the discussion. This division into the perspectives of context, object, viewer, and value is made more for the sake of clarity and manageability than for accuracy or legitimacy. As I am approaching the same phenomenon from different perspectives, and in order to avoid fragmentation, I will occasionally refer the element under discussion to other perspectives, which means that a certain amount of repetition is unavoidable.

2.2 Introduction – the context

By context I mean the environment in which museum visitors' experience of paintings occurs. Environment in its broadest sense may refer to the *paradigm* in which concepts such as the value of art, audience, and works of art are formed. Environment may also refer to the *methods* that we use to investigate aesthetics and other phenomena such as perception, people's experience of paintings, art history, and criticism. Environment in a narrower sense may refer to the *socio-cultural and physical circumstances* in which paintings are created and looked at. The context of museum visitors' experience of paintings may range from a modernist theory to a postmodernist theory, from an empirical discipline to a philosophical discipline, and from an isolationist environment to a contextualist environment. Understanding the different contexts in which the idea of the experience is formed and studied is important, in that it allows the experience to be seen from different perspectives.

2.3 The paradigm context

There are two main theoretical paradigms characterizing the discussion of aesthetics in the twentieth century: the modernist and the postmodernist. The main focus of modernist aesthetics is the aesthetic dimension of people's experience of paintings or what is called 'aesthetic experience' (Berleant 1985: 112). The modernists' preoccupation with the notion of aesthetic experience is evident in their concerted attempts to *differentiate* it from ordinary experience. Many other concepts related to the experience, such as the

creative process, the attitude of the artist, and the significance of the artistic content, are treated with such a differential concept in mind (Lang and Williams 1972: 6). Conner notes that 'modernist aesthetics is characterized by the attempt to define the nature of aesthetic experience in *itself*' (1992: 288, italics in original). Postmodernist aesthetics, on the other hand, calls into question the very notion of 'aesthetic experience'. Some postmodernists are more interested in describing the context in which the experience occurs than in defining it according to the notion of the context-free aesthetic experience. More precisely, postmodern theories consider the experience of paintings as an experience that may be related not only to the aesthetic dimensions of the work, but also to the social, historical, and cultural forces which shaped the painting, the viewer and the experience. Postmodern aesthetics differs markedly from modernist aesthetics in a number of ways and is recognized by some theorists as a repudiation of the modernist theory. However, there are also arguments that postmodern theories, instead of representing a decisive break (Shusterman 2003), are a deep continuation (Harvey 1990), progression or perhaps 'extension and intensification' (Williams 2004: 225) of the modernist theories. On the issue of aesthetics, modernist and postmodernist theorists have a very different understanding of museum visitors' experience of paintings and sometimes these differences are irreconcilable.

2.3.1 Modernist theories

Modernism was a broad intellectual movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that grew out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, a period when the importance of analytical rationality was emphasized (Novitz 2005), when the belief in human progress and individuality was upheld (Emery 2002), and which witnessed the development and

consolidation of the natural sciences and methods of scientific research (Williams 2004). Pragmatic knowledge about the world and human beings was developed, sometimes being put forward in the form of absolute truths and grand narratives. Under the growing influence of urbanization and consumer capitalization of industrial society (Drucker 1998), modernist aesthetics is dominated by the 'Perceptualist' tradition (Bryson 1991: 62). The perceptualist believes that knowledge and theories should be grounded in empirical observation. For the perceptualist, it is important that a museum visitor's experience of paintings involves an 'innocent eye', emphasizing the recovery of 'a sort of childish perception of [forms] ... merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify' (Ruskin quoted in Danto 1991: 207). A later version of the concept of the 'innocent eye' is that of the 'pure gaze', which is derived from the psychology of perception. As described by Bryson (1983:10), 'this body of perception is monocular, a single eye removed from the rest of the body and suspended in diagrammatic space'. It is argued by modernist theorists (e.g., Fry, Bell) that the pure gaze, with its emphasis on the naïvety and detachment of the observer, is an important prerequisite for an uncontaminated contemplation and enjoyment of paintings. The use of 'primitive' African art to provide inspiration by modernist painters such as Picasso and Matisse is another example of the modernist endorsement of a presumed naïvety and purity.

Modernist theories describe the experience of paintings as a unique experience with identifiable criteria that distinguish it from other experiences. By analysing the experience on its own and by isolating it from social or political contexts, modernist theorists attempt to formulate a closed and exclusionary definition that supposedly transcends cultures, places, and times. Modernist theorists assert that it is possible to identify universal or essential properties in people's experience of paintings. Such an

assertion is based on the assumption that all people have similar sensory capacities and mental structures, and therefore our experiences, though subjective, should bear some resemblance to one another (Blocker and Jeffers 1999). This would, however, be true only if human beings were *free* individuals who could be extracted from their social and historical origins. Modernists tend to focus on biological similarity but overlook cultural differences. Paintings are treated by modernists at their most extreme as 'autonomous aesthetic objects', in the sense that they are separated from real life and freed from historical ties, and also because they are objects 'the understanding and appreciation of which require a distinctive vocabulary and specific methods' (Ahlberg 1999: 11). For many modernists, paintings can be regarded as self-contained objects made for the sheer contemplation of a viewer and the disinterested pleasure that they evoke. Such theorists assume that art, science, politics, and morality have their own spheres of interest and that each should exist in its own right (e.g., Weber 1919/1948). Clement Greenberg, an American critic and an eloquent expounder of formalist modernism in the mid-twentieth century, argues that the importance of art lies in its purity and 'in its 'purity' [we] find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence' (1982: 6). Therefore, in the formalist/modernist tradition, museum visitors' experience of paintings is not related in any way to pragmatic, social, and moral issues. In short, the experience in the modernist paradigm is distinguished by 'distance, disinterestedness, and detachment' (Blocker and Jeffers 1999: 119).

2.3.2 Postmodernist theories

The term 'postmodernism' can be dated back to 1875 (Sheppard 2000: 351); however, the term gained wider attention during the 1960s and 1970s when prominent architects, such

as Charles Jencks, used it to refer to contemporary architecture and visual art which is different from modern art (Drolet 2004: 2-3). Postmodernism, succeeding modernism, is basically a 'challenge to the secular scientific tradition that grew out of the 18th-century Enlightenment, 19th-century industrialism and 20th-century technology' (Scott 1991: 15). Postmodern theories, unlike modernist theories that are bounded distinctly by the analytic tradition, are a family of loosely related theories, and unclear and contested concepts (Shusterman 2003). Postmodern theorists, being sceptical of the positivist and essentialist nature of modernism, question the notion that the experience of paintings is universal, concrete, detached, purposeless, (inter) subjective, and that it goes beyond history (Foster 1983: xv). Postmodern thinkers, who search for contextualized discourses rather than for universal truth, see the experience as a localized interpretation which is not subject to universals (Townsend 1997). Therefore, such cultural theorists have wider concerns: contextuality; cultural and historical influence on the formation of thoughts and experience; the fluidity, indeterminacy, and interpretability of knowledge; the constitutive and discursive role of languages in framing reality; power, manipulation and domination; and subjectivity and the self in the making of meanings. Within the postmodern culture, there is a growing demand to subsume the experience of paintings under the rubric of everyday life and the period of history in which the painting has been created. Hence, postmodern theorists celebrate 'heterogeneity, hybridity and impurity' (Conner 1992: 289). Scott briefly summarizes the difference between postmodernism and modernism as follows:

> Postmodernism, therefore, has three characteristics that seem to distinguish it from modernism. First, its distaste of 'metadiscourses', grand self-legitimating theories that can lead to intellectual sterility and oppression. ... Second, its awareness of the indeterminacy of knowledge, the contingency of truth which has been inherited from the post structuralists. And, third, its instinct for eclecticism and variety which has been derived from art, architecture and literature but now has much stronger intellectual reverberations. (Scott 1991: 18)

Being anti-holistic and anti-essentialist, postmodern thinkers would have no interest in defining museum visitors' experience of paintings in a closed and universal sense. They also reject large-scale, overriding theories of explanation (e.g., Flax 1990; Lyotard 1979/1984; Sim 1992). Drawing inferences from their views on art and culture, I suggest that, in postmodern terms, the experience of paintings may be described as an active participation of the viewer, who experiences paintings in relation to the social and political world. Postmodern theorists see personal experiences and concerns not as things which contaminate or interfere with one's experience of paintings, but as things which enrich and enhance this experience. Such a view is in stark contrast to the Kantian notion of 'disinterestedness' (1790/1952). Wheale, writing about the breaking down of high and low culture in the postmodern era, notes that audiences, being 'highly diversified', are 'receiving and constructing meanings for their particular purposes' (1995: 38). Just as postmodern architecture pays more attention to the immediate urban contexts, local materials and vernacular style, and to the needs of the inhabitants, postmodern aesthetics is more sensitive to the contexts in which people look at paintings, to the social and historical background of paintings, and to the cultural dispositions, expectations and desires of viewers. Museum visitors' experience of paintings, in the postmodernist paradigm, assumes a more eclectic character, involving an exploration of the different perspectives and meanings that paintings offer. Postmodernist thinkers also argue that our 'gaze' is inescapably framed by cultural and personal dispositions (e.g., Mulvey 1975), and that the function of eyes is something more than optical. Jenks notes that the modernist understanding of vision as 'correspondence' has dispossessed 'its iconographic, or metaphoric, role' (1995: 14).

Modernism and postmodernism are not monolithic movements (Roberts 1995; Scott

1991; Wheale 1995). It would be an over-simplification to reduce the two movements to two single opposing phenomena. However, I believe that pointing out their basic differences is crucial to an understanding of the discussion of some of the finer aspects of museum visitors' experience of paintings that follows. I suggest that an important contribution of postmodern aesthetic theories is that they bring us to the awareness of the non-universality of knowledge, the existence of contexts and the importance of meaning and interpretation. Viewers are no longer conceptualized only as individuals but also as members of a gender, cultural, ethnic or religious group. Paintings are no longer viewed as autonomous objects, as the modernists suggested, but as embodiments of the values, politics, and history of a society. The postmodern thinkers' alertness to history, culture and context helps us to broaden the scope of our attention, which has long been 'conditioned' by the views of significant modernist theorists. Instead of focusing on the supposed inherent aesthetic qualities of paintings, postmodern theorists direct our attention to the intricate connections between paintings and other aspects of human life. However, the tendency of postmodern theorists to over-emphasize interpretation should be treated with caution. To some radical postmodern theorists, a museum visitor's experience of a painting is only valid as a completely individual and novel explanation of the painting by the viewer. This reduction of the experience to a purely internal and individual construction of meaning is actually a deprivation or neglect of the immediate and sensuous qualities of the experience (Shusterman 2000). The multiplicity and indeterminacy of ceaseless interpretation as made by the viewer is another problem of the postmodernist, and is described by Bryson as 'anarchy of interpretation' (1991: 72). The view that personal experience cannot be validated by the external world would also imply that the experience becomes a private, idiosyncratic or unsharable experience – giving rise to a danger of falling into the Solipsist thought that 'only oneself exists' (Honderich

2005: 883) and 'the external world and other persons are representations of that self having no independent existence' (Runes 1983: 312).

To understand museum visitors' experience of paintings necessitates a good understanding of the definitions built up by modernist aesthetics as well as a careful examination of the experience with a postmodern eye. Modernists have come up with a number of clean and clear-cut *definitions* of people's experience of paintings (e.g., Beardsley 1982a; Smith 1995). However, at the same time, they separate the experience into the subject (the viewer) and the object (the painting): two separate entities that happen to meet each other in a decontextualized setting. Postmodernists have put forward a number of *explanations* of what it is to experience paintings. By integrating the viewer, the object and the context, they provide a multi-perspectival portrait of the experience, dealing with dimensions other than the aesthetic. However, at times, postmodernist theories become entangled with the many contextual threads that render their arguments contradictory and confusing. Modernist thinking still prevails in many walks of our everyday life. For example, many art and design textbooks are still organized in a way that reflects the entrenched belief in the universality of formal elements (Efland, Freedman and Stuhr 1996). It would be unwise to deny the modernist notion of aesthetic experience totally or to accept it without reservation. Instead, we should be aware that the modernist definition of aesthetic experience represents only one facet of our experience with paintings. Would a more comprehensive view be to see museum visitors' experience of paintings as a *total* experience, instead of just making its aesthetic character the focus of study? The postmodernist view of the experience provides a fuller description by recognizing such an experience as 'rich, complex, variable, unsystematic, even indeterminate' (Scott 1991: 18). Many possibilities remain

unexplored, and perhaps it is time to turn to postmodern theorists for their more inclusive and holistic tendencies and to the phenomenologists for *descriptions* of the experience in a concrete, contextualized, and interpretative manner.

2.4 The discipline context

There are two ways to approach aesthetics as a discipline. The first is as philosophical aesthetics. This is primarily a philosophical discourse devoted to the clarification of concepts and terms, the interpretation of generally accepted dispositions, examinations of texts, and the elucidation of philosophers' values and thoughts (Levinson 2003). Language is the tool that philosophers use to dissect the logical relationships among definitions, concepts, and beliefs. Its heavy reliance on language and its concern over words and texts have earned philosophical aesthetics another name: linguistic philosophy (Blocker and Jeffers 1999: 108).

The second way to study aesthetics is through the behavioural sciences; this is called empirical aesthetics (Berlyne 1974). This involves the study of the behavioural patterns of viewers and the biological basis of aesthetic experience 'proved' or 'determined' through experiments and systematic observation. Scientific measurement, experimental design, controlled observation, and statistical analysis are tools used in the discipline of empirical aesthetics. Within this discipline, people's experience of paintings is studied as the mechanics of the perceptual act.

Although philosophical and empirical aesthetics share a common interest in paintings, audience, and the viewer's experience, they approach these subjects from completely different directions. The present review focuses mainly on philosophical aesthetics, and there are strong reasons for such a focus. Museum visitors' experience of paintings is characterized by immediacy and subjectivity. Philosophical and other related approaches such as phenomenology and hermeneutics are more likely to capture the vividness, immediacy, and complexity of an encounter with paintings which, after all, is more a phenomenon of human experience and meaning than an optical response to a visual stimulus, which is largely a construct of natural science.

2.4.1 Analytic aesthetics

Within twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophical aesthetics, there are two contrasting approaches to experiencing paintings: the analytic and the pragmatic (Shusterman 2000). The principal foci of interest in analytic aesthetics are the concept of aesthetics itself, definitions of art, and the ontology of art representation and expression (Levinson 2003). Using language as an analytic tool and focusing mainly on concepts and words, philosophers of the analytic tradition are involved in logically rigorous and methodologically precise discourses on problems related to aesthetics and art (Blocker and Jeffers 1999). Some basic tenets of analytic aesthetics are the disinterestedness, autonomy and non-instrumentality of art, and the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience (Shusterman 2005). Analytic aesthetics can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, while Aldrich, Beardsley, Goodman and Dickie are some of the central figures of the twentieth-century American analytic tradition. Analysts dominate the philosophical arena and their arguments constitute the modernist theory of

aesthetics. Interest in pragmatic aesthetics had diminished by the late 1950s after Dewey (Shusterman 2005), but has regained attention recently (Smuts 2005) with the advent of postmodernism and the reinvigoration of contemporary continental theories. Pragmatism and continental theories such as structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstructionism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics[1] overlap in their quest for meaning and in the attention they pay to the socio-political dimensions of art (Shusterman 2005).

2.4.2 Pragmatic aesthetics

Dewey identifies three kinds of experience: ordinary experience, aesthetic experience and art-centred experience (Jackson 1998: 33-36). Dewey holds that ordinary experience can be aesthetic, although he differentiates between the two by characterizing aesthetic experience as possessing some kind of integral completeness, a general flow of conscious awareness, and a qualified unity. In his classic book, *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey describes how an aesthetic experience stands out qualitatively from an ordinary one:

> [W]e have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and then only is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. (Dewey 1934: 35, italics in original)
>
> In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. (Dewey 1934: 36)
>
> An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, that storm, that rapture of friendship. The

[1] Structuralism is concerned with signs and the internal systematic structure of using them in various forms of representations such as those of visual art and language. Poststructuralists agree that meaning is generated from structural differences, but insist that meaning is not stable but is a product of discursive practices. The aim of deconstructionism, closely related to poststructuralism, is to reveal and expose the underlying assumptions or logic within texts, especially in undermining binary thoughts such as mind/body, knowledge/experience, and men/women. Phenomenology is a philosophical method, as well as a method of inquiry, that deals with lived experience, self and the life-world. Hermeneutic theory challenges the idea of fixed, authoritative meanings bound within textual representations. Hermeneutics emphasizes interpretative reading into texts in order to articulate the hidden meanings of language.

> existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. (Dewey 1934: 37, italics in original)

By making aesthetic experience the very centre of his philosophy, Dewey contends that, being consummatory in nature, aesthetic experience is basic to all real experience, a position essentially different from the analytical belief that aesthetic and practical activities are separate. Dewey argues for a continuum between aesthetic experience and 'the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience' (1934: 3). For Dewey, not only works of fine art, but also nature, rituals, sports or popular culture may be sources of aesthetic experience. Dewey argues that the essence of art is not the material object that people perceive, but rather the experience created as a result of a complex interaction between the self and the object. To Dewey, a painting is therefore not just a physical entity, but a process, in which the viewer constructs the experience *with* it (1934: 162).

Dewey maintains that aesthetic experience is not always subjective, incommunicable, and thus unsharable. He holds that experience is a person's interaction with the environment, and the environment is something that everybody shares. Dewey's theory is characterized by assimilation, connection, and continuation, rather than by compartmentalization, distinction, and polarization, which are attributes of analytic theories (Shusterman 2005). By maintaining that art is experience in its most unified and articulate form, Dewey aims at 'recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living' (1934: 10). By repositioning the experience of art within everyday living, Dewey suggests that art helps us to understand the process of life and to reform our highly divisive hierarchical society.

Shusterman, inheriting theories from Deweyan pragmatism, notes that 'while art as a collection of sacralized objects may be locked up in museums, segregated from the rest of life, the same cannot be said for art's experience, whose effects flow into and enhance our other pursuits' (2000: 53). He values Dewey's definition of art as experience over all other attempts to define art as an art object, an institutional conferment or a historical conceptualization. He also emphasizes the importance of relating art to living experience. Pushing Dewey's idea further, Shusterman (2000) promotes what he calls 'living beauty', declaring:

> Aesthetics becomes much more central and significant as we come to realize that in embracing the practical, in reflecting and informing the praxis of life, it also extends to the social and political. The emancipatory enlargement of the aesthetic involves similarly reconceiving art in more liberal terms, freeing it from its exalted cloister, where it is isolated from life and contrasted to more popular forms of cultural expression. (Shusterman 2000: xv)

Benson (1993) notes that the Deweyan approach to people's experience of paintings offers far more than that offered by analytic aesthetics and positivist aesthetics. He says:

> [The Deweyan approach] offers a wider field of interest within which the methods of analytic philosophy might be applied. It also offers a more dynamic description of aesthetic experience than that implicit in positivistic psychological aesthetics, which aims to study the individual's 'responses' to art objects. (Benson 1993: 22)

The pragmatic theorists claim that our experience of paintings has ramifications in our everyday lives. Not only high art, but also popular art or even daily activities can be sources of aesthetic experience (Mullen 1995; Zuñiga 1989). The analytic tradition, on the contrary, confines people's experience of paintings to high art in the museum and construes aesthetic experience as socially irrelevant (Shusterman 2000). Following the argument of analytic theorists, museum visitors' experience of paintings is likely to become a brief moment of short-lived pleasure or an episode of instantaneous reactions

that 'hit [us] with a bang' (Perl 2000: 52), unrelated either to each other or to the prior and future experiences of the viewer. Would it not be more meaningful to view the experience from the pragmatist perspective, which includes continuity, fluidity, and dynamism? Is it not also necessary to investigate the experience, which has long been discussed as an abstract philosophical concept, as a lived experience that occurs in the everyday world and which is lived through by real persons? If museum visitors' experience of paintings is linked to the life-world, then it is both reasonable and justifiable to conduct a study which shows how museum visitors relate such experience to other life experiences and to other people in a concrete way.

2.5 The environment context

Environment, in a broader sense, may refer to the socio-cultural environment in which museum visitors' experience of paintings takes place, and in a narrower sense, to the immediate surroundings in which museum visitors look at paintings.

2.5.1 Socio-cultural environment

During the last few decades, philosophers have begun to discuss extensively the socio-cultural, historical, and institutional context in which paintings are created and received. Dickie (1997) points out the importance of knowing the culture or convention in which people's experience of paintings occurs. He cited a hypothetical case of a disturbed viewer who mounts the stage to save a threatened actor when watching a play.

Dickie argues that this is not a matter of losing *aesthetic distance* (this concept will be discussed in greater detail in chapter four, in which the theme of the viewer is examined) in Bullough's terms, but rather that the viewer is not aware of the theatrical convention that the audience does not interfere with what is happening on the stage. Following this line of argument, Dickie invents the institutional theory of art. He maintains that works of art are largely artefacts constructed by the 'artworld' or various institutional forces, that is, people accredited with specialized knowledge in art, such as established artists, museum curators, art critics, art historians, dealers, and collectors. It is this group of people, presumably considered as authorities or experts, who confer the status of 'art' upon certain objects. In such a case, social context governed by conventional rules plays a central part in making an object an 'art object'.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984) observes that aesthetic taste is less a question of recognizing the quality of an object and more a type of social class identity, 'distinction' and ownership of 'cultural capital', a form of knowledge, attitude and preference inherited from family and education through socialization. Bourdieu's (1965/1990) social analysis of artists' practices in terms of pattern of patronage, achievement of recognition, relations with critics and dealers, is also indicative of a kind of reproductive and closed art world.

A basic agenda of feminist theorists is to study how gender is socially constituted and experienced, and such interest has led them to question some of the more general notions such as self, knowledge, and power (Flax 1990: 20). Rejecting the universalist and essentialist assumptions of Western aesthetic theories, feminist aesthetics is a critique of the sex/gender system and of the social, historical, and political conditions that support it.

In particular, feminist aesthetics begins with the study of 'patriarchy' – 'a social system that distributes power, status, and rights to men and men's interests, to the detriment of women and women's interests' (Devereaux 2003: 647). One focus of early feminist theories in the 1970s is the tracing of the exclusion of women from, and the formation of male hegemony in, the art scene (e.g., Nochlin 1988a; Pollock 1988). To feminist theorists, women are represented, manifested, and discussed both in visual structures and thematic choices, throughout the history of art, in order to reproduce assumptions about 'men's power over, superiority to, difference from, and necessary control of women' (Nochlin 1988b: 1-2). They also found that not only are women often exposed as an object of the 'male gaze' (Devereaux 1995: 277), but many of us, including men and women, are trained to internalize the type of seeing adopted by the 'male gaze' that grew out of a patriarchal world view (Devereaux 2003). For example, Mulvey (1975: 22), in her discussion of film, cinema and advertising, explores how a woman's body becomes 'the direct recipient' of the male voyeur and acquires an object-like character in terms of psychoanalysis. In an analysis of a series of European oil paintings, Berger also notes that it is the norm rather than the exception that '*men act*' and '*women appear*' in paintings (1972: 47, italics in original).

Other philosophers, such as Danto (1981), Adorno (1970/1984), and Schapiro (1973), treat paintings as complex, historically determined manifestations of socio-cultural traditions. Danto acknowledges not only the 'artworld', but also historical, intellectual, cultural, and philosophical contexts as conditions for the interpretation and explanation of paintings. Danto argues that it is not works of art that make art theories but theories that make art. To paraphrase Danto's ideas, it is the art historical narrative that determines the status and our understanding of paintings. Adorno, associated with the Frankfurt School

of critical theory (1953-1969), maintains that art is necessarily a 'historically changing constellation of moments', and emphasizes the idea that aesthetic form is a sedimentation of social meanings (1970/1984: 4). Schapiro's writings in the 1950s (1973) show that modern art, although commonly identified as pure artistic forms, actually cannot be exempt from the effects of social and economic changes. He argues that artists create in their own personal and aesthetic contexts, and that these are also in a way socially determined.

Marxist theory, emphasizing the power relations between social classes, sees works of art as products of social reality and as means of social change. According to French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1970/1971: 136), art, being one part of the 'ideological state apparatuses', helps to reproduce and legitimize the existing socio-political environment by penetrating into people's everyday thought and acting at an unconscious level, a view closely related to Antonio Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' (1929/1971). Hegemony is the dominance maintained by the ruling groups in society 'through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups' (Strinati 1995: 165). For example, by reinforcing existing values and practices, art institutions help to maintain the status quo, which is an important condition for the perpetuation of the dominant ruling ideology. Art can conform to the existing ideology, but at the same time, art can be an instrument used to create social change. By revealing the true face of reality, art helps to awaken spectators from a false consciousness and to stand up against social oppression. Very different from the modernist view of autonomous art, Marxist aesthetics is 'closely tied to other forms of social activity – to the process of material production, to politics, philosophy, science, ethics, etc.' (Nedozchiwin 1972: 131).

Although, in the theories that have been reviewed in this section, it is not made explicit how museum visitors' experience of paintings is affected by the claims of each theory, such theories heighten our awareness of the differing contexts in which a painting is created and the different ways of seeing it.

2.5.2 Physical environment

Here, the discussion focuses on the physical environment or the ways in which we build up the environment as a place for experiencing paintings. Broadly speaking, there are two ways to approach paintings in a museum: the isolationist approach and the contextualist approach.

Isolationist approach

One way to exhibit paintings in a museum is to place them in an empty room with minimal furniture and decoration. For example, there may be nothing but a chair, which encourages museum visitors to look at the paintings quietly. We may concentrate on the details of a painting, such as its composition and its technical qualities. We may also let our imaginations roam around freely and interact with our personal experiences. In such an environment, the viewer is isolated from all distractions and is able to focus on the painting itself. This approach – which appears in many analytic philosophers' writings about aesthetic experience – can be traced back to Kant's 'disinterestedness'. The isolationist theory maintains that the meaning or import of a painting is contained in the painting *itself*, rather than in something that the form represents. Therefore, 'all one needs to appreciate or understand a work of art is continued re-exposure to the object itself' (Changar 1990: 88), for art objects speak directly to the audience.

Goodman (1985) illustrates the argument for the isolationist claim:

> Supplementary material, whether presented by lengthy labels, gallery talks, or cinema sideshows may distract and mislead, may block the insight a viewer could gain from undisturbed study of the work itself. Where nonverbal works are concerned, words are intrusive and nonverbal aids are presumptuous and competitive. In the museum, there should be a direct, unchanneled transaction between viewer and work. One learns to see, not by being told or shown how to look, but by looking. (Goodman 1985: 58-59)

Earlier formalist thinkers such as Clive Bell and Roger Fry would agree with the isolationist mode of approaching paintings. Bell (1914) writes:

> [T]o appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life. (Bell 1914: 27)

Contextualist approach

In sharp contrast is the contextualist approach to appreciating a painting. We may place it alongside other paintings for comparison. These paintings may be by the same artist, be in the same style, use the same technique or be on the same theme. We may also look for documents about the painting written at the time when it was created, or for those written by contemporary critics. We may study the life of the painter, as well as the socio-cultural environment in which he or she lived. We may even recreate the original situation in which the painting was intended to be seen: in other words, we try to put the painting in a context. The contextualists hope that the historical, social, biographical and psychological information presented will enhance our understanding. The contextualists argue that the production and reception of paintings is largely structured and conditioned by the practices and institutions of the society in which we live.

Goodman (1985) quotes the following as an example of an argument for the case of the contextualists:

> After all, that's not the way you [museum curator] look at a work yourself. You immediately assemble photographs of related works, consult books and articles, see all the comparable works possible (even taking the trouble to visit Europe on a grant), and generally betray your proclaimed principle that all there is in a work can be seen looking at it apart from all else. If with your experience and skill, you still need informative and comparative material before you, how can you expect the novice and the amateur to do without it? (Goodman 1985: 59)

Isolation theorists emphasize looking at paintings without the distraction of what they consider as irrelevant information. From this perspective, having repeated exposure to paintings and paying attention to their intrinsic qualities is the only way to experience paintings. In contrast, contextual theorists emphasize looking at paintings in relation to the many contexts to which the painting pertains. From their perspective, careful studies of the visual details and contextualization of paintings would be a preferred way to experience them.

As the present study deals primarily with people's experience of paintings in a museum, the museum context, being one of the environment contexts, will be discussed separately in the next section.

2.6 The museum context

In Greek mythology is the story of the nine 'muses' – goddesses who oversee human affairs relating to the arts and literature. The word 'museum' comes from the Greek word *mouseîon* (Barnhart 1995: 495) – places where muses are worshipped and where studies in arts and history are carried out. In ancient Greek temples, priests periodically compiled

inventories of offerings to gods and displayed sacred objects (Burleigh-Motley 1994). Such work may be considered as an early form of museum activity – organizing and displaying valuable objects. Something resembling a classical museum which illustrates the idea of collecting and exhibiting can be traced back to the German 'wunderkammers' (meaning 'chambers of wonder' in English) of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a time when colonial expansion and seaborne trade were beginning to gain in importance (Burcaw 1997). Out of their curiosity to know more about the world, people from royal and noble families, wealthy businessmen, and the clergy collected artefacts that they had acquired during their travels or seized after victory in battle and stored these objects in wunderkammers. In order to show their generosity and for the purpose of enlightening the less fortunate, wunderkammers were opened on special days, performing more or less the function of museums. Not until the collapse of imperial and feudal power in the eighteenth century did the public museums we have today come into existence. For instance, during the French Revolution in 1789, palaces and royal residences were transformed into museums and private treasures were turned into public collections (Stone 2001). Osborne (1985) classifies contemporary museums into two categories: the historical and scientific, and the aesthetic. He notes that one major function of the latter type of museum is to preserve artistic heritage and to promote the appreciation of this heritage; the other is to patronize art production and to shape public taste.

Although introduced originally by the aristocracy and possessing an elite character and immense autonomy, after two centuries of evolution public museums are now institutions mediating between competing visitor expectations, public accountability and diversifying culture. The museum has not ceased to evolve, and the rate of this evolution has in fact increased over the last two decades. In the words of Belting: 'Despite its own claims of

timelessness, the museum has always changed faces' (2002: 74). In a study of museums from the Renaissance to the modern period, Hooper-Greenhill (1992) demonstrates that the museum is never a static entity but changes with time, always reflecting socio-cultural and political environments. She notes,

> Looking back into the history of museums, the realities of museums have changed many times. Museums have always had to modify how they worked, and what they did, according to the context, the plays of power, and the social, economic, and political imperatives that surrounded them. Museums, in common with all other social institutions, serve many masters, and must play many tunes accordingly. (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 1)

During the last two decades, changes have been noted in almost every aspect of the museum. Macdonald (1996) outlines a number of changes that museums had undergone prior to the beginning of the millennium: for example, the exhibition of artworks dealing with controversial subjects, efforts to appeal to diverse communities, appropriation by other cultural institutions, increasing dependence on interactive media and technology in displaying and collecting, and the employment of new promotional strategies. Witcomb (2003) also identifies important changes that have been taking place in museums, such as the movement towards cultural tourism, the merging with commerce and entertainment, and the dissolving boundary between high and low culture. With the evolving nature of the museum, museum visitors' experience of paintings also changes.

In English usage, the term 'art gallery' is defined as a place where works of art are exhibited, while museums are places specializing in science and historical learning. In a review of the historical development of museums since the Enlightenment, McClellan (2003) notes that the museum has a long tradition of fostering public instruction. The major goals for the establishment of early museums, revealed by their utilitarian nature, were either to civilize the poor and the working class or to improve the design in the

practical arts. With such goals in mind, museums try hard to make displays accessible to the public through various means such as 'visual symmetry, concise presentations and clear labels' as well as proper 'sequencing of objects and management of traffic flow' (McClellan 2003: 15). Hooper-Greenhill also observes that '[d]uring the nineteenth century, education had been the prime function of the museum', and that by that time, 'object-teaching was common in schools' (1994: 25, 27). Founded in 1853, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was among one of the early examples realizing the idea of a museum as 'an agent of instruction' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 126).

By the turn of the twentieth century, the utilitarian and instructional ideal of museums had given way to one of disinterested contemplation for the purposes of aesthetic pleasure. Quoting from the opening address of the Cleveland Museum in 1916 given by Charles Hutchinson, McClellan (2003: 25) notes that by that time 'the principal function of an art museum is the cultivation and appreciation of beauty'. He also holds that there was a growing tendency towards aestheticism and that museum curators became increasingly scholarly after the 1920s. According to McClellan, the formalist and isolationist approach to museum education had become the guiding philosophy during that period. Art museums provided less and less assistance to viewers in interpreting museum objects. Works of art were now regarded more as objects for silent contemplation than as means for education. Duncan also observes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the idea of the aesthetic museum had come to replace the once-held belief that the purpose of the 'art museum is to enlighten and improve its visitors morally, socially, and politically' (1995: 161).

The following review focuses on the physical, sociological, cultural, ideological, and

educational context of the museum and in particular on the relationship between this context and museum visitors' experience of paintings.

2.6.1 The physical context

Some people, when they think of a museum, are immediately drawn to talk about its impressive architecture, spacious environment, and purpose-built facilities. 'When people are asked to recall their museum experiences, whether a day or two later or after twenty or thirty years, the most frequently recalled and persistent aspects relate to the physical context' (Falk and Dierking 2000: 53). In a study of diaries recalling people's experience of visiting museums, Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson (2002) find that attention to and interaction with the museum environment is common. A museum is a physical entity and that it 'provides a physical – a material – embodiment of space: a geographical, an architectural environment' (Silverstone 1994: 171). Physically speaking, a museum is a building or work of architecture in which objects are kept and shown to the public for their historical, social, scientific or artistic merits. Recently, virtual museums, which use photographic and digital technology, are becoming more and more common and in some cases well received. However, most museums containing paintings are still bounded by walls and thousands of people still flock to them every day. As suggested by Silverstone,

> Yet visitors do still have to come to the museum. When they come, they are faced with a physical arrangement of objects, images and texts through which they will pass and of which they might make some sense. The space is in a number of senses a potential space (Winnicott, 1974). It is a space in which visitors are offered, and of necessity accept, an invitation to create and to complete the experience of being in the museum. (Silverstone 1994: 173)

The physical environment of a museum, from its imposing facade on the outside to its clean and generous space on the inside, is something that museum visitors can physically

move around, feel, touch and experience. Many people treasure the experience of being in a museum, and the physical environment may be one reason for this. But at the same time, people may find the museum building awesome and reject or submit to the authority that it symbolizes. The monumental nature of the museum's physical presence, its heavily guarded environment and its immense spatial arrangement sometimes inspires awe in its audience. However, Sutton suggests that the enclosing museum environment has a healing effect on museum visitors. He notes that,

> The part of museum experience that is so healing might be the way that museum walls provide enclosure, which can be linked to the ideal stabilized state (vital to recovery) of feeling "held" while allowed one's personal space. (Sutton 2003: 50)

Following on from Sutton's ideas, the museum may be compared to a sanctuary or asylum where people seek protection and shelter from everyday burdens. Museums create the necessary space and the light for people to attend to paintings without having to concern themselves with day-to-day affairs. As a result, visitors' experience of paintings in the physical environment of museums may perform the therapeutic function of calming them down and instilling in them a sense of peace.

In the view of many people, experiencing modern paintings in a museum requires space and silence and the museum environment has been tailor-made for such a purpose. In his famous essay *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O' Doherty (1986) comments on how gallery space frames the experience of modern and contemporary art:

> The history of modernism is intimately framed by that space; or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point where we see not the art but the space first. ... An image comes to mind of a white, ideal space that, more than any single picture, may be the archetypal image of twentieth century art; it clarifies itself through a process of historical inevitability usually attached to the art it contains. (O' Doherty 1986: 14)

The physical environment of the museum inevitably has an effect on people's experience of paintings inside the museum. The museum environment is unique and so different from other places of daily experience that visitors cannot pretend not to see it. The museum setting and the authority it possesses or the consolation it offers signal that we are an audience and have to behave in a certain way. Museum visitors' experience of paintings has to take into account this physical context, which may perform the seemingly contradictory functions of both overpowering and soothing its audience.

2.6.2 The sociological context

To some sociologists, the museum is a place where the interests of a particular social class are represented, where the values of a particular social class are transmitted and where behaviour typical of that class takes place. For example, in a sociological study of museum visitors in Europe, Bourdieu and Darbel (1969/1991) suggest that visiting art museums is basically a family socializing activity during which taste is transmitted from one generation to the next through a process of 'cultural capital'. They argue that it is through 'learning by habit and exercise' (Bourdieu and Darbel 1969/1991: 109), which happens outside the museum, that people inherit their love of art. In other words, people's taste and love of paintings is a product of cultivation, rather than something which they are born with.

Some people, however, argue that the museum is more complicated than a simple representation or expression of the social order. To Hooper-Greenhill (2000), the museum is more an arena where various social forces construct a discourse of knowledge. Hooper-Greenhill notes that meanings are constructed through visual interpretations and

such interpretations are social discourses reflecting 'the relationships between looking, knowledge and power' (2000:15). Both Fyfe (1996) and Macdonald (1996) share this view and dismiss museums as mere agents of direct social reproduction impacting on people and communities. Fyfe (1996: 223) notes that 'the museum ... is simultaneously an agency of classification and a relationship of cultural interdependence between groups'. Macdonald argues that the museum is a formative and creative process, during which people engage in the interplay of social relations. She notes that:

> Museums are socially and historically located; and, as such, they inevitably bear the imprint of social relations beyond their walls and beyond the present. Yet museums are never *just* spaces for the playing out of wider social relationships: a museum is a process as well as a structure, it is a creative agency as well as 'contested terrain' (Lavine and Karp, 1990: 1). It is because museums have a formative as well as a reflective role in social relations that they are potentially of such influence. (Macdonald 1996:4)

Bourdieu and Darbel's (1969/1991) explanation of museum visiting as 'habitus' elaborates further on the social constructive nature of the museum. It is a useful theory that aids our understanding of the shared discourses and social contacts that take place within a museum. The museum is a place where different people, having their own sets of 'acquired, socially constituted dispositions' or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1987/1990: 13), work, discuss and negotiate for their own existence. In other words, people are actors carrying certain dispositions, acting out behavioural patterns, and possessing particular types of mental framework. Regardless of whether they know or understand what their roles are, people think and act in ways deriving from their social roles, and this constitutes the fundamental operation of the habitus.

Viewed from the perspective of the social context, the social setting of the museum frames people's mentality and expectations when they see paintings in a museum. When people enter a museum, they expect certain things to happen. Although some people visit

museums and see paintings alone, this does not mean that there is no social interaction in the museum. People interact with the museum environment, with the people around them, with the museum staff and with the paintings themselves. In brief, people will bring their prior knowledge and experience with them when they come to see paintings in a museum, and they will also act in ways that are determined by their social roles. However, the idea of cultural ownership and inheritance overlooks the dynamic nature of museum visitors' experience of paintings. It does not explain why people are critical of the present system and sometimes act according to their own will instead of going along with those predetermined roles. We have to consider the process of individual agency – 'the capability of persons to make choices and act on these choices' (Martin 2004: 136).

2.6.3 The cultural context

Museums can be considered as symbols of a nation as well as manifestations of national pride and cultural heritage. Museums represent not only the material culture but also the spiritual culture of a civilization, illustrating various aspects of people, including their traditions, beliefs, attitudes, ways of living, ideas about men and women, and concepts of knowledge and reality. Visiting a museum is actually a way of keeping in touch with the culture, past and present, of a society. By 'presenting and representing cultural assumptions', the 'museum is constructed as a frame that influences the public perception of art and society' (Jeffers 2003: 107, 108).

From a historical perspective, Trodd (1994) demonstrates how the National Gallery in London, during the establishment and development period from 1822 to 1854, constructed its own institutional, social and cultural identity with an emphasis on history,

education and popular instruction. The socio-cultural environment of that time framed the policy of the National Gallery, having an impact on its admissions policy, collecting policy, usage of collections, and the underlying educational philosophy.

If studied from a particular perspective, such as that of feminism, the museum provides a window through which the cultural dispositions of the men and women of a society can be revealed and understood. Using paintings by Picasso and de Kooning as examples, Duncan (1995: 115) demonstrates that the space in contemporary modern art museums is 'masculinized'. Analysing it from the perspective of a woman, Porter argues that the museum is a representation of a gender stereotype. Porter (1996) recognizes that:

> [T]he whole structure of museums – abstract knowledge and organization as well as concrete manifestations of buildings, exhibitions and collections – was built upon categories and boundaries which embodied assumptions about men and women, masculine and feminine. (Porter 1996: 107)

From the perspective of acculturation, museums can be powerful initiators of cultural change for public well-being. Museums, as suggested by Worts (2003), are one of the mechanisms our society possesses for building cultural awareness and identity. In view of the changes brought about by globalization, urbanization, population growth, and cultural pluralism, Worts (2003: 222, 229) urges museums to shoulder the responsibility for nurturing 'a soulful connection amongst individuals, between people and the environment', 'engaging the public in reflective practices and participatory exchanges', and 'facilitating human consciousness'.

On the one hand, museum visitors' experience of paintings is a way to learn about the culture of a society. Through looking at paintings or objects in the museum, people can come to understand many facets of a society. However, the way that such understanding

is constructed will depend heavily on the perspective adopted by the person who is looking. The viewer who looks only at what is superficially visible in a painting will have a very different experience from the viewer who goes on to analyse critically the underlying cultural connotations of the painting. On the other hand, museum visitors' experience may be considered as a channel through which it is possible to raise or change the cultural consciousness of the people in a particular society. Seeing paintings in a museum may become an activity by which people come to know more about themselves, as well as about others and about how they relate to the environment, the society, and the world at large.

2.6.4 The ideological context

Some theorists consider the museum as a place where politics are practised and ideologies are transmitted. Duncan (1995) identifies three functions of museums: aesthetic, educational, and political. However, Duncan argues that it is the last function that museums really perform, that is, power, control and ideology. Comparing museums to places of ritual, Duncan portrays museum as places where values and beliefs are communicated and ceremonies and customary acts are performed. Visitors, being framed in a specialized time and space in the museum, adopt a form of behaviour with a fixed pattern. From the visiting culture to school education and from the physical environment to the professionals who work at the museum, in many different ways visitors are encouraged to take time from their daily lives, adopt a different language and look for a different experience – 'enlightenment, revelation, spiritual equilibrium or rejuvenation' (Duncan 1995: 20) – an experience comparable to that which occurs in religious places. According to Duncan (1995: 281), museums bear a resemblance to places of ritual, from

their appearance (temple facade, classical building) to their functions (contemplation), from the type of people that they attract (educated) to the way that people act (receptive), and from the participants' experience (purified, transformative) to the participants' responses (awe, wonder).

Crimp, in his book *On the Museum's Ruins*, states that the 'museum is an institution whose time is up' and 'post-modernism is founded on the collapse of the museum's discursive system' (1993: 282). To Crimp, the museum will become dispensable, particularly with the advance of postmodern art. In order to reveal the ideological structure of museums, Crimp (1993: 287) argues that what we need is 'an archaeology of the museum on the model of Foucault's analyses of the asylum, the clinic, and the prison', 'for the museum seemed to be equally a space of exclusions and confinements'.

When the museum is conceived as a place of ideological symbol and transmission, museum visitors' experience of paintings becomes a tool through which the dominant ideology is enforced. Such a view emphasizes the repressive nature of the museum experience, and carries a bias towards determinism. I agree that museums are not ideologically neutral and that they convey all sorts of messages to their audience. However, visitors retain a certain amount of power over their experience in a museum. The concept of museums as part of an ideological machinery is inadequate to explain museum visitors' experience of paintings, especially the visitors' own contributions and the relevance of their personal lives in the making of the experience, and the self-reflecting ability of the audience and the museum. Quoting examples from five African art exhibitions, most of which were held in New York, Kaplan (1995) argues that both the exhibition organizers and the visitors are active players, without being

monopolized by a singular vision. People are not completely passive, but negotiate through individual agency their experiences of paintings and the museum. As Silverstone (1994: 166) suggests, 'museums are communicating environments in which complex meanings are negotiated'. He goes on to argue that 'museums, galleries, exhibitions are texts' constructed 'according to a variety of logics' and, in part, are open to interpretation. Rice (2003: 84) also points out that in a study of first-time museum visitors, people '[have] broken the barrier and breached entrance into the hallowed halls'.

2.6.5 The educational context

In every mission statement or exhibition philosophy of a museum, regardless of the museum's location, size, nature, collection, or target audience, it has become almost imperative that the phrase 'to educate' appear within the lines. 'There are now scarcely any museums, throughout the world, which do not provide educational programmes' (Xanthoudaki, Tickle and Sekules 2003: 1). Education has become one of the most important justifications as well as a strategy to secure funding, for existing museums, and for the founding of new public museums. Instead of being collection-driven, museums are becoming more audience-driven (Doering 1999; Hooper-Greenhill 1994) and education-conscious (Roberts 1997). Museums now also have to serve thousands of people who have diverse tastes, needs and expectations. Not only assigned the duty to collect, preserve, research, and organize valuable objects, now museums have to shift the focus 'from what objects say to what viewers think' (Rice and Yenawine 2002: 292). This requires more care and more knowledge about the audience and their experience.

Falk and Dierking's Contextual Model of Learning

Falk and Dierking (1992) proposed the Interactive Experience Model and viewed museum experience as an interaction between the personal context, the physical context and the social context. The model was later refined as the Contextual Model of Learning (Falk and Dierking 2000) in the museum. Eight factors have been identified as the principle considerations for learning in a museum (Falk and Dierking 2000: 137). In the personal context, the viewer's motivation and expectation, prior knowledge and interest, learning styles and ways of perceiving, as well as the degree of free choice, are considered. With regard to socio-cultural context, the internal social dynamic within a group of people who visit the museum together and their interactions with other people in the museum are important. With regard to the physical context, adults or teachers should consider the orientation of their students before and during the museum visit, the display design of the exhibits and subsequent reinforcing events. It is the interactions between these three contexts that create the museum experience.

Hein's Constructivist Museum

After examining the educational theories of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, Hein proposed a kind of 'constructivist museum' where visitors construct knowledge actively through negotiation with the museum exhibits (1998: 34). Hein identifies four types of educational theory in museums: didactic, stimulus-response, discovery, and constructivist. Hein contends that constructivism is an educational theory conducive to learning in the museum. He notes that, when building a constructivist museum, visitors should be provided with: (1) a feeling of competency, safety, orientation, and comfort in moving around, (2) the opportunity to make connections between objects and their previous experiences on their own initiative, (3) opportunities to learn using a variety of sensory

modalities, (4) an array of different materials or contexts to explore and learn about other than the exhibits themselves, (5) opportunities for them to engage in social interaction, (6) different environments that appeal to different developmental stages, and (7) abundant intellectual challenges.

Based on the model proposed by Hein, the author of this thesis (Tam 2002) has identified four different approaches adopted by museums for the enhancement of the experience of works of art. They are the formalist, the analytical, the existentialist, and the constructivist. These approaches are not mutually exclusive and should be considered as a theoretical framework portraying the relationship between educational theories and aesthetic theories.

The Formalist Approach

Museums adopting the formalist approach emphasize the formal qualities of art objects. Such qualities are the colours and tones, lines and shapes, and texture and space, which we sometimes call visual elements. By examining the ways in which these elements are organized and related, viewers look for visual harmony, balance or unity in the work. The museum places objects in a comfortable, often spacious environment designed to enable viewers to engage in contemplation. All kinds of external information are considered to be redundant. The museum emphasizes the notion that if a piece of work is good enough, it will speak for itself and allow the viewer to have a fruitful experience. Historically, the modern art museums in New York, such as the Guggenheim and the Museum of Modern Art, are typical examples of this kind of setting. Through the careful selection and presentation of objects of high artistic merit as defined by the curatorial staff, these museums believe that they can offer visitors a direct experience of visual art, contributing

to an improved aesthetic sensibility and an educated taste on the part of the public.

The Analytical Approach

Museums using the analytical approach emphasize knowledge that fosters understanding and cognition. These museums carefully study the contextual factors in the production of art and examine in turn how art influences society. The museum places objects in their cultural and social contexts, relates the present to the past, and gives detailed information about the artist and artistic techniques. The museum tries to eliminate any possibility of visitors' feeling fear or humiliation at the idea that they are being given an 'unseen exam' (Wright 1989: 126) in front of works that are totally unfamiliar, by providing contextual information from different sources. With the analytical approach, visitors would then expect to obtain a holistic understanding of the work, which in turn increases the possibility of having a meaningful experience in the museum. An exhibition entitled 'Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art' described by Soren (1992: 94) is a good example of this approach. In this case, museum educators aimed to help visitors understand the underlying meanings of contemporary art using communication devices. Visitors were provided with a rich array of interactive tools and interpretative aids, which Soren described as 'edutainment', a kind of approach typically found in Disneyworld (1992: 96).

The Existentialist Approach

Existentialism is a school of philosophy that concerns itself with human existence and questions the meaning of life and existence. Museums adopting an existentialist approach encourage visitors to construct meanings by relating the artwork to their personal experience through the simple act of contemplation. There is no mediator

between the object and the viewer, as meanings and feelings come from direct apprehension. To the existentialist, meaningful experience comes from immersing oneself in the contemplative act and letting feelings, previous experiences, and intuitions lead the way. Introspection, rather than inspection, works within the existentialist domain. A museum that subscribes exclusively to the existentialist approach is rare, but we can find some more active proponents of this approach. Funch (1993) describes what Goodman does at the Berkeley University Art Museum as an approach that acknowledges viewers' personal engagement and concentrates on the existential dimension. Viewers' first spontaneous experiences with an artwork were used for subsequent discussion in which they related the work to their personal life experiences. To Funch, Goodman's approach reinforces the emotions and personal images stimulated by works of art and establishes a close relationship between the viewers' felt perceptions and their ordinary experience. He maintains that approaches like this develop perceptual sensitivity, since they encompass a holistic view of artworks by acknowledging the complex nature of viewers' personal interactions with works of art.

The Constructivist Approach

In museums using the constructivist approach, visitors are provided with help to make connections between artworks and the external world, building on visitors' own knowledge and experience. The source of a meaningful experience of a work of art is the communication viewers establish with the work and within themselves. Working within the constructivist approach, visitors are provided with the necessary tools and information to search for meanings. An array of different materials or contexts to explore and learn about other than the exhibits themselves is readily available for visitors to experiment with without predetermined goals. Visitors are given opportunities to

experience in a variety of sensory modalities and opportunities are provided for them to engage in social interaction (Hein 1998). The experience described by Kindler (1997) at the Vancouver Art Gallery may be an example of this approach. She found her sons very much enjoyed the interactive opportunities at an exhibition of works by Andy Warhol, during which activity stations, a brief theatrical performance, hands-on workshops, viewing devices, and books were available for visitors to work on freely and playfully. More importantly, Kindler notes that such experience contributes more to the acquisition of 'attitudinal knowledge', i.e., the sense of enjoyment and satisfaction that comes from experiencing art, than 'declarative knowledge', i.e., knowledge about the artist, art history, and art concepts (1997: 13).

These different museum approaches may act as a framework to understand museum visitors' experience of paintings in relation to the educational strategies adopted by museums. They describe how museums and visitors work out ways to approach paintings: what is expected from the viewer and what is prepared by the museum.

The above review of the different museum contexts shows that the museum is a complex institution which assumes sometimes contradictory roles and which imparts messages with multi-layered meanings. 'In contemporary thinking, the museum can no longer claim to be a neutral backdrop for the display of art, because it is understood to be a highly complex institution that participates in the social construction of culture and in the legitimization of power' (Rice and Yenawine 2002: 290). To understand museum visitors' experience of paintings requires an understanding of the different roles of the museum. It can be argued that the experience of paintings cannot be divorced from the context in which the paintings are seen. The museum's physical environment,

sociocultural settings, ideological underpinnings and educational philosophy contribute in different ways to this experience. The highly complex nature of the museum renders the experience complex too. In the words of Hooper-Greenhill: a 'contradictory and complex situation is at the heart of the museum experience' (2000: 15).

2.7 Summary

In brief, this chapter has shown that our understanding of museum visitors' experience of paintings is largely affected by the contexts in which we situate the experience. The modernist view provides us with a picture of how the experience of paintings stands out from ordinary experience. Postmodernist theories draw our attention to the context in which this experience takes place. On one side, the modernist paradigm, the analytic philosophical discipline, and the isolationist approach share the theme of the differentiation and autonomy of art from other spheres. On the other side, the postmodernist paradigm, pragmatic aesthetics, and the contextualist approach emphasize pluralism, pragmatic engagement, and contextualization (Shusterman 2003).

We differentiate in order to classify, and classification is the fundamental work of the natural sciences. Theories, knowledge and even experience gained by classification serve the purpose of naming and categorizing phenomena. As noted by Biswas, 'knowledge through differentiation merely amasses representations' and orders things 'in terms of sets and categories'; such knowledge may be 'correct' but not 'concrete' and 'remains dissociated from life' (1995: 21). Museum visitors' experience of paintings is a human

phenomenon, and as such should be studied using methods of human science, not of natural sciences. While differentiation is basically a concept of the natural sciences, contextualization comes from language. We have difficulty in understanding a single word when it is presented on its own. It works better when the word is put into a sentence or a context. When our aim is to understand but not to classify a phenomenon, contextualization is more appropriate. Moreover, in order to obtain a balanced and comprehensive view of museum visitors' experience of paintings, it is necessary to explore the phenomenon from perspectives other than those of the modernist paradigm and the analytic tradition.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature – The Object

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the 'object' as one distinct area of museum visitors' experience of paintings. Four different theories of painting are examined. There is an investigation of a number of different claims, interwoven with an account of their implications for the experience of viewers. Some notions of painting have already been presented in the previous chapter on 'context', and they will be revisited in this chapter. The last section contains a discussion of models of art criticism, an intellectual discipline which is closely related to the way in which we conceptualize paintings.

The term 'painting' has many connotations. For instance, a painting is a product of conscious effort on the part of the painter: the result of purposeful activity. Another common implication of the term 'painting' is of a physical object that exists by itself, as opposed to a process, a concept or an experience. There are a number of accounts which discuss painting from various perspectives. These accounts express contradictory views in many ways, but they do provide insights into the nature and experience of paintings. In this chapter, I discuss painting from four different perspectives: as an expression, as a form, as a social production, and as a text.

3.2 As expression

The *expressionist* believes that a painting is an expression of human feelings, emotions, and sentiments. This view owes a large debt to the ideas of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romantic Movement. To the expressionist, paintings are manifestations of the inner subjective world of artists, talented persons blessed with an exceptional sensitivity and in possession of the necessary skill to express it. In its crudest form, expressionist theory assumes that an artist, having strong feelings in the first place, vents her feeling in the form of a painting, then the work in turn 'infect[s]' (Tolstoy 1896/1930: 123) or communicates the feeling to viewers. According to this theory, paintings have the power to move an audience, and museum visitors' experience of paintings is to feel what the artist feels.

Croce and Collingwood provide more sophisticated versions of the expressionist theory. Croce (1913/1965) denies the material, utilitarian, moral and cognitive aspects of paintings. To Croce (1913/1965: 20), art is intuition and 'intuition is production of an image' that expresses the intense feelings of the artist in a symbolic way. The physical art object is an embodiment of intuition and is less important than intuition itself, reflecting much of Croce's Idealist ontological thought (Spackman 1998). To appreciate a painting, Croce suggests direct apprehension without thinking. Croce (1913/1965: 15) notes that '[art] dies in the spectator or listener, who from rapt contemplator of art changes into a thoughtful observer of life'. Following Croce's aesthetics, Collingwood (1938) refines expressionist theory by suggesting that a painting is something more than an externalization of the artist's feelings, and by stating that the creative process itself is an expression. It is during this process of instinctive self-discovery that the artist comes to

clarify and individualize her own intuition, without which she will never realize her real intention. Collingwood places more emphasis on imagination, on the part of both the creator and the viewer, and he holds that 'art is not contemplation, it is action' (1938: 332).

The expressionist theorists argue that the expressive qualities of paintings are a source of aesthetic experience and the perception of the ways in which a painting manifests its expressive qualities becomes aesthetic. The expressionist theory accords more importance to the minds of the artist and the viewer than to the painting itself. Therefore, a painting is just a transmitter, if not an embodiment, of human feeling. And the mind, according to the expressionist, is something independent. It is a collection of ideas and beliefs. By focusing on the feeling evoked by a painting, the expressionist expects that the audience would experience, if not an identical, then a lesser, version of what the artist feels. Following the expressionist argument, if the artist feels sad and creates a painting imbued with her sad feeling, then the audience should feel a sad feeling similar to that of the artist.

There are problems with the expressionist view of painting. A basic flaw in the theory is its assumption that paintings can or should convey feelings. Many artists create without being emotionally involved. If it is necessary for a painter to have an emotion: for example, anger, before she can express anger, then the role of imagination in creative activities becomes minimal. Moreover, there are paintings that make us think rather than feel because 'some art is about communicating and/or exploring ideas' (Carroll 1999: 74). For example, Brecht (1948/2004) argues that works of art should engage an audience's critical capacities rather than their feelings. Another assumption of the theory is that there

is congruence between the feeling of the painter and that of the audience. In actuality, there are many occasions on which such congruence does not occur. For instance, there are cases of miserable artists producing joyful paintings. The viewer may also have a different or even completely opposite response, at odds with the painter's intention. Should a viewer know the intention of the painter? Is it ever possible to recover an artist's intention?

For most of the time, we interpret and evaluate paintings. We read into as well as read from paintings. It is not unusual for us to see the same painting at different times and make different interpretations or judgements. What accounts for the difference is what we bring to the experience, perhaps a different set of criteria or a different world view. Expressionist theories tend to accept whatever people offer as long as it is claimed to be an authentic expression of their own feelings. By placing the artist at the centre of both the production and the reception of art, and seeing art as the personal expression or vision of the artist (Sheldon 1996: 49), the expressionist theory accords no importance to the role of the viewer. What, then, is the role of an audience within expressionist theory? According to some earlier versions of expressionist theories, viewers should open their hearts wide enough to accommodate whatever is put before their eyes. Accordingly, the more naïve a viewer, the more able he or she will be to achieve a direct communication with the artist. In a sense, the viewer is no more than a passive receiver. At a later stage, expressionist theorists attempted to distinguish between the concept of 'being an expression' and that of 'being expressive of' (Graham 2005: 141). In the former definition, a painting is an expression of somebody while in the latter, a painting is expressive of certain qualities, and such qualities are 'independent of the state of mind of the person whose expression it is' (Ridley 2003: 214). Such differentiation resolves the

problem of congruent feelings between artist and viewer. However, if the above distinction is valid, then the viewer is actually trying to understand the artist's intelligent formulation of feeling in its expressive form. Accordingly, museum visitors' experience of paintings becomes more of a cognitive process, a claim that most expressionists would refute.

3.3 As form

If the expressionist theory of paintings is preoccupied with the artist's mind and emotions, then the *formalist* theory tends to be preoccupied with the audience's eyes and perception. By form, formalists mean externally perceivable features, such as the shape, colour, line, texture, mass, proportion and structure of an object. In painting, this refers to the visual elements and the ways in which these elements are organized, combined or related. Bell proposes the theory of 'significant form' (1914: 17), and a more sophisticated theorist, Fry (1926), painstakingly differentiates 'pure' from 'impure' arts. Bell argued that significant form is the common essential quality shared by all paintings, independent of time and culture. The formalist, in some ways like the expressionist, agrees that a painting can express emotions through formal significance. Formalist theory may thus be seen as a form of expressionist theory.

The formalist claims that museum visitors' experience of paintings is the perception of their significant form. Such perception is characterized by 'direct apprehension', a kind of grasping of the intrinsic formal structure of a painting that appeals to *our senses*. Hirst

(1992) writes about the formalist approach in *A Companion to Aesthetics*:

> [T]he *formalist* view sees aesthetic experience as centrally the perception of certain qualities of a formal, structural or relational nature that can be discerned not only in the various fields of sense perception but also in patterns of abstract ideas, in symbolic expressions and in social and political relations. On this view the aesthetic qualities in, say, a natural situation or a work of art are not its immediate physical properties or its representational or expressive character, but the qualities of, say, elegance, balance or unity to be found. (Hirst 1992: 127, italics in original)

Museum visitors' experience of paintings, according to the formalists, is made possible by shifting their perception from the representational to the formal aspect of paintings. For example, French painter-theorist Maurice Denis (1907/1982: 59) argues that viewers' 'senses must discover in the work of art itself – abstraction made of the subject represented'. He applies his formula to some Post-Impressionist painters including Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cezanne, despite the fact that most of their works contain representations. In this sense, a painting is self-referential, i.e., referring to the work itself, but not to extraneous social, political, economic or moral values. At its most extreme, the formalism of the mid-twentieth century acknowledges the flatness of the canvas and the painting surface as the locus of attention (Greenberg 1982). Within the formalist tradition, a painting should neither be a mirror of reality, nor an expression of emotion in representational content, but a formal configuration that appeals visually – as we find in abstract art: having 'form' as its 'content'. Content in representational paintings should be, as Greenberg writes, 'avoided like a plague' and 'dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself' (1961: 5, 3). There is no need for viewers to understand the content of works but simply to do as Bell proposes: 'to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space' (1914: 27). Echoing Bell's claims, Fry notes that all the audience needs to do is to adopt 'the artistic

attitude of pure vision abstracted from necessity' (1920: 21).

Art historians and critics (e.g., Scruton, Weitz) have found many difficulties with the formalist explanation of painting. For example, how can we discriminate between 'significant form' and 'insignificant form'? Should we admit significant form to be an essential property of art, when art seems so very diverse? With regard to representational paintings, it would be difficult to attend only to their form. Perhaps training in painting and a familiarity with concepts such as proportion, symmetry, balance and unity would help in this respect, however. It is impossible to see only the shapes *per se* without seeing what they mean. For example, on many occasions, we observe the facial expressions of people in a painting, rather than attend to how the colour of the clothes complements the skin colour or how the figure stands out from the background through spatial manipulation. Such exclusive attention to form at the expense of content has to be learned or 'cultivated'.

The situation becomes more difficult when people are confronted with non-representational paintings – a display of various abstract forms that do not make explicit reference to real objects. Many people, especially those without art training, simply do not understand what these forms mean, and such paintings may 'produce a great deal of angst, if not negativity' (Rice and Yenawine 2002: 290). People often experience what hooks (2000: 98-99) calls 'defamiliarization' – an inability to 'identify with art due to an absence of representation'. Formalists claim that we are born with an innate ability to appreciate colours and visual forms. I, however, would argue the opposite. It is often difficult to understand an abstract form, especially when it is not embedded in anything meaningful to the viewer.

The formalist theory works no better with the paintings of our time. If an understanding of paintings from the formal perspective necessitates a 'cultivated enough' audience, then the audience of contemporary paintings needs to be extremely cultivated. An understanding of the paintings of our own time depends very much on the viewer's prior knowledge of art history and theories, on his or her understanding of systems of signifying, and sensitivity to mass culture. Painting in the postmodern period makes extensive references to images and materials from popular commodity culture (Wheale 1995). Parody of past art and making reference to history are commonplace, but at the same time artists suspend the original meaning of images and make references within their own systems (Wheale 1995: 51). Even a good grasp of the formal language of paintings does not help a viewer to understand paintings in the postmodern genre.

The problem with the formalist agenda lies in its total contempt for the referent, that is, the world that a painting makes reference to, and in its reluctance to serve any human purpose other than the aesthetic. In formalist interpretation, a painting becomes a closed system that serves no political, didactic, economic or other ends. The viewer does not need to have any knowledge about the person who does the work, why it is done, or how it is done. The internal structure of a painting or its 'pure form' becomes the only inner logic that holds the viewer's attention (Greenberg 1982; Fried 1998). It is rare that we see a painting without seeing its representational qualities, or that we divorce our viewing experience from our experiences of daily life. The formalists neglected the fact that paintings are largely cultural products, reflecting many aspects of the historical, social, economic, and technological environments in which they are created.

3.4 As social production

While expressionists and formalists attempt to articulate the nature of painting, social theorists are interested in the social formation of paintings. From the perspective of sociologists, paintings are cultural creations or productions, reflecting the many social, ideological and political interests that underlie them. According to Hauser, paintings are 'ways and means of social organization' that 'struggle to preserve society' (1958/1972: 271). Seen from this perspective, paintings are collective expressions of social values and existence; hence, sociological interpretations of paintings would be important for the viewers. Among all social theories, the Marxist theory may be considered as one of the most influential and well developed. Apart from contributing to the formation of 'Socialist Realism and political denunciations of "bourgeois art"' (Lang and Williams 1972: 1), Marxism played an important role in formulating aesthetic concepts, especially in art and literary criticism. The main argument in Marxist theory concerns alienation, class struggle, revolution, and ideology. Instead of treating paintings as autonomous objects that should be isolated for the purposes of contemplative enjoyment, as the formalists maintain, Marxist theorists see a painting as an agent for the transformation of reality (Althusser 1970/1971; Lenin 1926/1967), a representation of the ideology of a social class (Hadjinicolaou 1973/1978), or a complex interplay between the artist's practices and historical, social, ideological and aesthetic conditions (Clark 1973).

The Marxist theory is a theory of action, a 'practice of transforming', and a 'story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression' (Eagleton 1976: vii). A painting in the eyes of the Marxist may be an instrument for effecting political changes. Lenin (1926/1967: 154) once said, 'art in

particular, should be imbued with the spirit of the class struggle being waged by the proletariat for the successful achievement of the aims of its dictatorship, i.e., the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, the abolition of class, and the elimination of all forms of exploitation of man by man'. Therefore, the Marxist insists, the function of art is threefold: to perpetuate the dominant ideology, to criticize the existing ideology, and to create propaganda. Accordingly, institutions of art, like other social institutions, such as churches and schools, serve to reproduce ideological forms of consciousness. For example, by employing and approving artistic conventions in paintings, the dominant art world maintains a monopolistic view of objectivity and the value of paintings. In Marxist language, both the creator and the viewer of paintings are subject to ideology (Althusser 1970/1971). Marxist aesthetics disagree with the formalist's credo 'art for art's sake', and attack the elitism associated with it (Rivera 1973). They are more concerned with the motive and social interest realized through paintings.

In the Marxist tradition, the audience should not simply see a painting, but should also relate it to the 'extra-artistic ideological structure', the greater structure that defines the relationship between art and society (Lang and Williams 1972: 8). The Marxists would not sacrifice seeing the social implications in paintings for the sake of seeing their expressive or formal elements alone. Marxists, who are materialistically-oriented, are concerned with the way that art functions. Therefore, they attack the formalist idea of the passive, disinterested contemplation of paintings for its tendency to ignore the historical character of the work and the educative and moral obligation it bears. Seeing art as an agent of social change, the Marxists acknowledge that museum visitors' experience of paintings is also a social and educational experience. It is therefore the social, rather than the formal, significance of a painting that the viewer should be looking for.

Contemporary theorists who are sympathetic to Marxist analysis tend to portray the relation between art and society with more subtlety. Drawing on theories of semiotics and psychoanalysis, as well as Marxism, French feminist writer Julia Kristeva (1974/1984), for instance, conceptualizes art as a representation containing non-rational drive-governed semiotic elements such as rhythm, colour, and tone, and stabilizing symbolic elements such as laws or structures governing representations. Kristeva (1974/1984) further notes that art is a return to the repressed maternal body challenging the precariously maintained balance between these two classes of elements, thus making art a potential site for revolutionary changes and social liberation. Timothy J. Clark, a Marxist art historian famous for his dense analysis of paintings, including Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (Clark 1973) and Manet's *Olympia* (Clark 1984), rejects the idea that paintings are simply reflections of social relations. He agrees that history is neither only the background information to paintings nor that artists,are subject to social influence in a set way. Rather than intuiting analogies between artistic form and ideological content without historical explanation, Clark (1973: 12) prefers to consider paintings as manifestations of 'the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structure and processes'. Like earlier Marxists, Clark sees paintings as deeply embedded in the history that makes them, but one difference between Clark and early Marxist theorists is his emphasis on the processes, mediations or transactions during which various social forces are at work.

Eagleton (1990), in his book *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, conducted an extensive historical analysis and critique of the concept of the aesthetic since the eighteenth century. Commenting from a Marxist and materialist paradigm, he demonstrates how aesthetics is

constructed by bourgeois society. Eagleton illustrates in the following paragraph how the concept of aesthetics complements the gradual rise of the middle class in the Enlightenment period:

> The aesthetic, then, is, from the beginning a contradictory, double-edged concept. On the one hand, … The aesthetic offers the middle class a superbly versatile model of their political aspirations, exemplifying new forms of autonomy and self-determination, transforming the relations between law and desire, morality and knowledge, recasting the links between individual and totality, and revising social relations on the basis of custom, affection and sympathy. On the other hand, the aesthetic signifies what Max Horkheimer has called a kind of 'internalised repression,' inserting social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operating as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony. (Eagleton 1990: 28)

In the passage quoted above, Eagleton draws our attention to how aesthetics is determined by economic imperatives: the economic conditions of society determine its cultural 'infrastructure' – politics, art, religion, etc. He has shown that aesthetics – our beliefs in what art, paintings or aesthetic experience are – 'connects with the power-structure and power-relations of the society we live in' (Eagleton 1996: 13). Revealing aesthetics as a key concept of bourgeois society, Eagleton's account highlights the importance of understanding phenomena from the ideology that they embody.

Informational and technological developments, accompanied by the rise of free markets, have enhanced the autonomy of individuals. Class structure has changed enormously and social mobility continues to increase. With a change in social class, people also change mentally. Scott observed that, 'manufacturing gave way to service industry, primary production was displaced by secondary exploitation … and consumers outshone producers' (1991: 16-17), and in Scott's opinion, social analysis appeared to have lost its bite. Marxists have difficulty explaining museum visitors' experience of paintings using

a single all-embracing theory. For example, although acknowledging the fact that ideology plays a vital part in shaping the arts, Adorno (1967/1981) prefers a more dialectical method to analyse art and social conditions. The deterministic nature of the Marxist theory that deprives the viewer of the power of making a thoughtful decision and a personal discovery fades away in some post-Marxist accounts (e.g., Clark, Habermas). Succinctly, Wheale states, 'the varieties of people, processes and audiences involved in the range of arts and media are too diverse to be usefully described in one terminology' (1995: 61).

3.5 As text

With the advent of media culture, mainly in the form of advertising, television and computer-generated realities, thousands of images are produced and consumed every day. Paintings, representing one aspect of visual culture, are seen by some theorists as texts. A text is a bounded system with signs that carry meanings. One basic assumption of such a view is that a painting is composed of signs, or the work itself is a sign. A sign is a basic meaning unit that we use to signify something. A contemporary painting is sometimes considered more a statement or an object of discourse than a representation, an expression or a formal construction. For example, Conceptual Art artists (e.g., Joseph Kosuth) 'use language to question the status and framing conditions of the art object' (Harrison and Wood 1992: 799) and the 'communication-artist' (e.g., Jenny Holzer) works 'with language in a visual way' (Wheale 1995: 47). Associating paintings with symbols, signs, and texts, which are largely linguistic concepts involving meanings and interpretation, is

not new. Painting has long been seen as a language used to express or communicate something (e.g., Ducasse 1964; Goodman 1976; Tolstoy 1896/1930). Pictorial or formal symbols found in paintings function like linguistic symbols, but in a unique way. More recent visual theories, armed with complex analytic tools, such as structuralism, iconography, and semiology, focus on how images work to achieve meanings in a broader context. The underlying system or the relations among signs become the centre of study, with special reference to power relations, historical and cultural dispositions. These theories shift from articulating the nature of paintings or explaining the production of paintings to analysing or interpreting paintings.

The semiological method of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1959), originally developed as a linguistic model, is a formal, structural and systematic study of significations. To Saussure, a sign, analytically speaking, consists of the signifier and the signified. The former is the symbol itself and the latter is the meaning attached or assigned to it. Semiology is a method of study designed to uncover the internal structure of the signifier and signified at a given time. To the semiologists, there is no inherent relation between the signifier and signified; rather, it is the underlying rules and conventions among signs that specify the relation (Rose 2001). In the case of paintings, meaning is therefore generated through a system of structural differences, rather than being derived from the pictorial representations within them.

Bringing elements of Saussure's semiology and Marxist ideology together, French critic Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies* (1956/1973), talks about the relationships between signs, images and meanings. For Barthes, a painting becomes a text when it means something. Barthes writes, 'Pictures become a kind of writing as soon as they are

meaningful: like writing, they call for a *lexis*' (1956/1973: 110, italics in original). Adding an extra layer to the signifier and the signified, Barthes emphasizes a sign's connoted meaning, which is always concealed and is open to interpretation. Accordingly, a painting is not a closed system but a space through which the viewer navigates and in which he creates 'endlessly proliferating meanings which have no stable point of origin, nor of closure' (Burgin 1986: 73). The intention of the author is no longer important, as announced by Barthes, 'the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (1977: 148).

Although representational paintings have dominated the development of Western painting ever since the Greek period, Bryson argues that paintings are not a 'record of perception', for such a view neglects the 'social character of the image, and its reality as sign' (1983: xii). To Bryson, signs in paintings not only work as symbols within an internal self-sufficient system, as suggested by Saussure's theory of semiology, but also interact with the political, economic and signifying practices of the outside world. Bryson writes about the role of the viewer as follows:

> Viewing is an activity of transforming the material of the painting into meanings, and that transformation is perpetual: nothing can arrest it. Codes of recognition circulate through painting incessantly, and art history must face the fact. The viewer is an interpreter, and the point is that since interpretation changes as the world changes, art history cannot lay claim to final or absolute knowledge of its object. (Bryson 1983: xiii-xiv)

Abandoning the perceptualist tradition, theorists propose substituting an interpretative paradigm. Postmodern writers argue that the modernist or formalist view of seeing a painting as an independent entity isolated from the world is problematic in relation to paintings of our time. Jenks, discussing seeing as a cultural practice, points out the deficiency of positivist perceptualism and suggests that vision is 'socially constructed or

culturally located' (1995: 10). Jenks criticizes the singular and determining 'ways of seeing' within modern Western culture. Burgin (1986) points out that theories such as those found in Marxism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis have shown that the modernist's differentiation of art from history, culture, and the irrational has been a failure. In the light of these new theories, formed since the 1970s, Burgin further notes that it is impossible for the modernist to claim that paintings are a kind of symbolization independent of other symbol systems, including, most importantly, language. Rather, Burgin draws on the importance of the 'intertextual' nature of paintings in the production of meaning (1986: 204).

If paintings work like a text through the use of signs and symbols, then viewers must have some knowledge or understanding of how these signs and symbols are used in order to make sense of what they are seeing. Bourdieu argues that only viewers who possess the 'cultural competence' to 'encode' would find paintings meaningful and interesting (1979/1984: 2). To Bourdieu, a viewer who lacks the 'cultural code' cannot move from the 'primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience' to the 'stratum of secondary meanings', i.e., the 'level of the meaning of what is signified' (1979/1984: 2-3). He argues that cognition, acquired through acculturation, is a precondition for a meaningful experience of paintings on the part of museum visitors.

3.6 Looking at paintings: art criticism models

Art criticism is an area of study where aesthetics and education overlap. Models of art

criticism have been used in schools to study artworks and paintings. The ways in which we conceptualize paintings definitely influence how we talk and write about paintings and, in other words, how we experience them. The above sections have shown that paintings can be seen in different ways, and a review of the most widely-used art criticism models in schools and colleges shows that many of these art criticism models build on the expressionist and formalist theory of paintings.

Broudy's aesthetic scanning

Broudy (1987) notes that image plays a major role in the unfolding of imagination, the learning of concepts, and the nurturing of values, and therefore image-learning should be an important part of the school curriculum. Broudy compares aesthetic perception to reading: we see language symbols when we read and we see pictorial images when we look at paintings. Broudy proposes 'aesthetic scanning', a method to examine the sensory, formal, technical and expressive properties of paintings. The sensory properties of a painting are its basic visual elements, that is, shapes, lines, tones, textures, sizes, space, and colours, while formal properties are the ways in which these elements are organized to achieve visual effects such as unity, rhythm, balance, repetition, dominance, and variation. An understanding of the technical properties of the painting will help the viewers understand how the painting is made. When examining the expressive properties of the painting, viewers are actually engaging in interpretation and are making judgements about the meaning, mood, and ideas of the painting.

Feldman's four-stage analysis

According to Feldman (1992), art criticism is a systematic process that involves four fundamentally different operations: description, formal analysis, interpretation, and

judgement. These operations proceed 'from the specific to the general and from easy to difficult' and from 'focus on particular visual facts' to 'make inferences about [paintings'] overall meaning and value' (Feldman 1992: 487). First, viewers objectively describe what they immediately see in a painting, without analysing, explaining or making inferences or judgements. Keen observation and detail, complete description is important in this stage. Second, on the basis of what viewers observe in the description stage, they analyse the relationship between them; often this takes into consideration the principles of organization. In the stage of interpretation, viewers explore what the artists want to communicate and the underlying meaning of the painting. Seeing paintings or artworks as objects of human creation, Feldman maintains that artworks inevitably embody the values of the artist. However, Feldman suggests that viewers should not be restricted by the artist's intention and should formulate their own hypothesis regarding the interpretation of the painting. Lastly, viewers make a final judgement about the value or significance of a painting, and provide justifications for such a judgement. In this process, viewers may consider the paintings' historical merits when compared to other works and the appropriateness of the technique used in the work.

Lankford's phenomenological art criticism

Based on the work of Merleau-Ponty and Kaelin, Lankford (1984) applies certain phenomenological tenets to art criticism and develops a phenomenological method of art criticism. His method emphasizes the dialectic interaction between the viewer and the art object, and the using of both subjective and objective information derived from the art object. Lankford's model is based on three clusters of foundational propositions: 'conditions inherent or necessary for critical dialogue, proposals for the practice of art criticism, and statements suggesting the significance of art criticism' (1984: 152).

Lankford (1984) identifies five components of art criticism: receptiveness, orientating, bracketing, interpretative analysis, and synthesis. Receptiveness refers to the readiness of viewers to perceive a painting without preconceptions and to approach the painting with curiosity. In the orientating procedure, viewers establish a communicative relationship with the painting and determine its visual, spatial and temporal perimeters so that attention can be properly focused. Bracketing is a conscious act in which viewers concentrate on the qualities and meaning of the painting, and the context which is relevant to the understanding of it. Interpretative analysis is an important part of the art criticism process. Viewers describe the painting in terms of its visual elements and their relationships, its representational and symbolic meanings, and feelings created by these elements. Drawing from information derived from interpretative analysis, viewers synthesize their experiences and make a holistic interpretation of the painting, revealing some of the significance of the object. Moreover, such an interpretation is not absolute or final, and is subject to reinterpretation.

Anderson's cross-cultural art criticism

Anderson (1995: 198) holds that culture is the 'collective values, perspectives, mores, and ways of doing things' developed by individuals and groups of people as a response to their environment. He notes that current art criticism models are largely products of formalistic aesthetics and Eurocentric essentialism. He calls for an examination of works of art from a social, anthropological perspective and in particular, in their original and authentic contexts. Based on his 'Pedagogical Art Criticism' model (1988, 1993), Anderson develops a framework: Cross-cultural Art Criticism. It involves five stages: reaction, perceptual analysis, contextual examination, personal interpretation, and synthesis. In the first stage, viewers react to a painting with direct and sensuous

responses. Such reactions allow viewers to make an initial commitment to the object, and form the basis of subsequent analysis and interpretation. Perceptual analysis consists of representation, formal analysis, and formal characterization. In the representation stage, viewers describe the painting in terms of its thematic and formal qualities, focusing mainly on what can be seen in the painting. In the stage of formal analysis, which aims to detect perceptual organization, viewers critically examine the formal elements, the relationships between these elements, and the technical aspects of the object. In the stage of formal characterization, viewers attempt to identify the style of an art object and focus on its expressive qualities. Contextual examination focuses on the function of art objects. By asking the question 'what is it for?', viewers explore the psychological context of the maker, the social context in relation to other art objects, as well as the object's cultural implications, and underlying belief systems (Anderson 1995: 204). Interpretation is a stage during which a viewer thinks about personal feelings in relation to the expressive content of the painting. Viewers may use their life experiences and information obtained from perceptual analysis and develop their own interpretation. Synthesis is a creative combination of the description and analysis of the painting, personal interpretation and expert views and results in an evaluative judgement of the painting. In this stage, viewers determine not only the significance of the painting in terms of its importance in art historical development, but also in relation to the viewers' personal context.

Broudy's aesthetic scanning and Feldman's four-stage analysis share a common emphasis on the formal qualities of paintings, an emphasis that grew out of modernist aesthetics. '[B]oth Feldman's and Broudy's methods have been primarily focused toward an analysis of the perceptual, ostensibly intrinsic, qualities of the art work. It is assumed that an analysis and interpretation of art's formal qualities ... are universally

applicable' (Hamblen 1991: 8). The prescriptive, structural, and trans-cultural nature of these models is also a reflection of the modernist belief in the transcendence of aesthetic experience. Anderson's model pays more attention to the role of social, cultural, and historical contexts in forming a work. However, his emphasis on asking the fundamental question 'How does this work of art make me feel?' (Anderson 1988: 29) in the reaction stage shows that he still clings to the expressionist theory that artworks make us feel.

Dismissing art criticism models as a form of discourse, Geahigan (1999) proposes treating art criticism as a 'critical inquiry' *process* that involves school students in personal response activities, research activities, and concept and skill development activities. Instead of relying mainly on observing an artwork, these activities emphasize the sharing of responses, the searching for contextual knowledge, and the acquisition of relevant aesthetic concepts and critical thinking skills.

Drawing from postmodernism and post-structuralism, Gooding-Brown (2000) suggests a 'disruptive model' of interpretation. The process begins by identifying existing authoritative interpretations of an artwork made by experts such as art historians, critics and artists. Students are then encouraged to examine critically the discursive practices in which these interpretations are formed as well as their own positions regarding these practices. Disrupting the dominant discursive practices, students in the final stage re-think their original positioning and re-interpret the work, taking into consideration the various discursive practices relating to it.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter I have shown that it is not necessary to see a painting as an expression, nor as a form, social production, or text, exclusively. Any attempt to define the nature of paintings from a single perspective tends to be limited. A painting can be an expression containing visually pleasing forms, and also signifying in a meaningful way a particular aspect of the world. The definitions that I have reviewed reveal different values or features of paintings. What matters for this thesis is not the definition itself, but its implications for our understanding of museum visitors' experience of paintings. The role of the viewer ranges from perceiving to interpreting, from passive contemplation to active construction, from being disinterested to being interested, from being untutored to being cultivated, and from being pleased to being educated. If paintings can perform many functions at the same time, it also seems plausible that a museum visitor can assume different roles simultaneously.

Chapter Four: Review of Literature – The Viewer

4.1 Introduction

The viewer is the person who views or experiences paintings, and in this study is a museum visitor. Without an experiencing person, there will be no experience. As described in previous chapters, the viewer assumes very different, and sometimes contradictory, roles. This chapter focuses on the psychological perspectives, and examines the role played by the viewer's perception, body, attitude, attention, and imagination.

4.2 Perception

The term aesthetic comes from the Greek word *aisthētikós*, which means 'perceptible to the senses' (Barnhart 1995: 13). German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1750/1986) first used the term *aesthetic* in the eighteenth century and began a systematic study of aesthetics as a 'science of sensory knowledge'. Since then, many philosophers have established a close link between aesthetic experience and aesthetic perception and use the terms interchangeably. In our daily life, perception is a kind of seeing, touching, hearing, and feeling that enables us to understand things and make appropriate responses. It is a basic process that enables us to live and to learn. It is also a meaning-making process from which our intelligence grows and accumulates.

Aesthetic perception theory

Reid (1931: 41) identifies aesthetic experience with perception, claiming that 'aesthetic experience is perception, but something more'. He distinguishes aesthetic experience from perception by arguing that aesthetic experience, besides generating the merely sensory pleasure derived from apprehending perceptual data, evokes a sense of meaning, a significance, and a value which he calls the 'untranslatable essence' of the experience. For Arnheim (2004), perception is a highly intelligent activity involving thought, imagination, and emotion. Arnheim (2004: 5) states that 'perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention'. Arnheim's work builds largely on Gestalt Theory, emphasizing the viewing of paintings as a unified whole. From the gestalt perspective, 'aesthetic experience of an art object is possible only if the *whole* of the art object can be conveniently grasped by the mind, the senses or the memory' (Tatarkiewicz 1975/1980: 333, italics in original). Aldrich (1968) agrees with Reid and Arnheim's argument that perception is an integral part of people's experience of paintings. Aldrich distinguishes aesthetic perception from sensorimotor observation by specifying that the latter only involves seeing the physical properties of objects. Aldrich (1963: 88) invented the term 'prehension' for aesthetic perception, denoting an imaginative awareness of the different 'aspects' of the perceived object. Aldrich (1968: 106) gives two examples of aspects that may produce the effect of space: 'related-linear-and-color-elements-as-space-structure' in non-representational art and 'consideration of likeness' in representational art. Aldrich suggests that by shifting to an aesthetic mode of perception, we are able to experience paintings aesthetically. However, Aldrich's theory is strongly criticized by Dickie (1997) as giving no reasonable evidence to suggest that there are different modes of perception.

According to perception theorists, aesthetic experience occurs when we begin to perceive a set of qualities or aesthetic qualities as being possessed by a painting. Perception theory also assumes that viewers can control this perceptual shift voluntarily. Viewers can choose to see either the formal qualities, or other aspects of the work. In other words, museum visitors' experience of paintings is a matter of adopting a particular way of seeing. If this is the case, then viewers may not confine themselves to perceiving the forms of a painting, but may shift their perception to other qualities found within the painting. By adopting an 'aesthetic point of view' (Beardsley 1982b), perception theory provides us with a method of experiencing paintings and enjoying them aesthetically. It is a useful concept in that it enables us to approach paintings with a particular focus. It also points to ways in which an aesthetic point of view can be taught and practised, although ironically, some perception theorists would suggest that a naïve eye is the only requisite for an appreciation of paintings.

Perception theorists focus on the observable and disregard how viewers make meanings from paintings. Perception theorists agree that people's experience of paintings is something more than mere perception, but what is that something more? They propose that it may be intuition, but without defining it exactly. It seems relatively clear that museum visitors' experience of paintings begins with perception but does not end with it. Danto draws our attention to the view that perception is not an independent phenomenon but is always tied up with language and description. Drawing on theories from Wittgenstein, Danto argues that we use language to shape our experience of the world and that therefore 'experience is indelibly linguistic' (1991: 204). According to his view, perception and description, a form of language we use to represent the world, co-penetrate each other and therefore artistic perception always involves interpretation.

Perception theory treats paintings and the viewer as two separate entities, without considering that they may be emotionally, culturally, socially, and consciously related. It also only directs us to what we can look for in paintings, without really touching the nature of the experience. It does not tell us exactly what happens when museum visitors are engaged with paintings. The theory does not address the fact that while some museum visitors find a painting aesthetically pleasing, others do not. Qualities that are seen as aesthetic within paintings may differ from work to work, person to person, and time to time. The perception theory concentrates on the inherent qualities of paintings and lacks a consideration of the context in which things happen and the interpretive nature of experience. Perception theorists claim that seeing is the source of all knowledge. The problems with such a view are discussed in the following section.

4.3 Body

When we discuss the experience of paintings, we tend to focus on the domain of vision or perception. It is the eyes, and not the body, which are believed to be the locus of the experience. The Western philosophical tradition, especially under the influence of the Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes, has been dominated by seeing, and this has had a profound influence on modern culture. Descartes has been considered by some critics as 'the founding father of the modern visualist paradigm' (Jay 1993: 70). In the positivist and empirical conventions, seeing is objective; being objective is rational; and rationality is a tool which may be used to seek the truth. Observation, as in the direct observation of nature which underlies natural science, becomes the preferred mode of

seeking knowledge. Seeing is far more important than the other senses when attempting to know and understand the world, while sight is the perceptual skill that is most extensively used and discussed. Jay (1993: 3, 9) terms this domination by vision 'ocularcentric', and its influence in different cultures as forming different 'scopic regimes', such as the Cartesian, the Baconian, and the Baroque. To be more specific, the ocularcentric nature of human society has meant that the dominant sense of sight has permeated discourses on religion, philosophy, art, science and literature.

4.3.1 The Cartesian body

A common view of perception, that is, seeing, is that it is an interaction between Descartes' idea of an active 'inside' mind, independent of the body, and the 'outside' world (Jenks 1995: 3). Perception is the transportation of the 'outside' into the 'inside'. Judovitz (2001) reviews the cultural transformations of the idea of the body and the notion of embodiment among French thinkers from the Baroque to the Post-Classical period. He notes that early modern notions of the body, especially in the accounts of Michel Montaigne in the sixteenth century, address 'the body in terms of communicability, understood as both in an intersubjective and intercorporeal modality' (2001: 169). However, with the emergence of Cartesian thought,

> we witness surprising new ways of conceiving the body as an anatomical, technological, and philosophical entity. These include the anatomical redefinition of the body in terms of the circulation of blood, its technological resynthesis as a machine, and its philosophical reduction to a material thing. (Judovitz 2001: 67)

Judovitz holds that the modernist era is largely a legacy of the Cartesian and Post-Cartesian mind-body duality. During this period, the body is seen as the prison or

just the location of the mind. Modernist inquiries into the experiences of viewers are therefore generally preoccupied with the explanation of the reconciliation of the 'inside' self and the 'outside' world. To the modernist, seeing becomes the mediator between internal and external reality. The body is seldom referred to in discussions about experiencing the world or experiencing paintings. When the body is mentioned, it is tied up with its material, physical, fixed, and anatomical properties. The body becomes comparable to a machine, an analogy that can be dated back to the late Medieval Ages (Judovitz 2001). Writing about the context of the modern art gallery, O'Doherty (1986) also notes the body's invisibility:

> Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not – or are tolerated only as kinesthetic mannekins for further study. ... You are there without being there. (O'Doherty 1986: 15)

It was after Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty that philosophers attempted to salvage the body from the Cartesian reduction of it to the status of a physical object and to investigate the body's role in our experience of the world. With a renewed interest in continental philosophies and the introduction of feminist theories over the past few decades, our awareness of the body and notions of embodiment have grown. Especially within the phenomenological and feminist theories, there have been increasing debates about the body in terms of its philosophical, social, and historical construction.

4.3.2 The phenomenal body

The Western philosophical tradition places the mind over the body. Accordingly, mind is the governing agent while the body is the mere executor of the mind (Pollio, Henley and

Thompson 1997). In sharp contrast, in a phenomenological account, the viewer is a totality made up of mind, vision and body. Phenomenologists note that the life-world, in which we find ourselves, is always working within the contexts of 'spatiality, corporeality, temporality, and relationality' (van Manen 1997: 102). Whenever reality is experienced, it is experienced by a body at a certain time in a certain space with a certain relation to other objects. It is within these contexts that we make sense of what we experience and find meanings in the world. Phenomenologists therefore criticize the notions of disembodied aesthetic experience. To phenomenologists, the presence of the body is an important aspect of any experience and the body is a lived and experiencing body. Hence, museum visitors' experience of paintings is an *embodied* experience. As noted by Polanyi (1966), our body is also a knowing body:

> Our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. In all our waking moments we are *relying* on our awareness of contact of our body with things outside for *attending* to these things. Our own body is the only thing in the world which we normally never experience as an object, but experience always in terms of the world to which we are attending from our body. It is by making this intelligent use of our body that we feel it to be our body, and not a thing outside. (Polanyi 1966: 15-16, italics in original)

Engaged in looking at paintings, we may be under the illusion that only our eyes are working. However, according to phenomenologists, our body is engaged too. We go nearer for a closer look or distance ourselves from the painting in order to get a full view of the whole painting; we bend down to read the caption; and if the painting is a large one, we raise our heads to look at it. Brodsky argues that '*the viewer is never a "disembodied" eye*' (2002: 101, italics in original). She writes,

> Whether placed in a gallery or museum, site-specific, in performance spaces inside or in the street, in the mass media or in electronic space, intended for political, social and/or aesthetic response, the viewer moves in a complex fashion sometimes, in, around, on top of and beneath the work stimulating the synergism of hearing, smelling, feeling, as well as looking. (Brodsky 2002: 101)

Phenomenologists attempt to counteract this disappearance of the body and the dissociation of body from mind in experiences. As observed by Giddens, the modernist view of the body has also gradually changed from viewing it as an extrinsic 'given' to a view that the body 'becomes itself reflexively mobilized', assuming a state of changeable, reflexive, personal expression (1991: 7). To understand the experience of the viewer in terms of her bodily reflexivity, embodied identity and bodily consciousness will be an important aspect of studies about museum visitors' experience of paintings.

4.3.3 The gendered body

In the modernist's formulation, the body assumes an abstract, anonymous and universalized character. Recognizing biological differences only as materiality, the body is seen as neutral, indifferent and filled with transcendental consciousness by modern theorists. Feminist thinkers disagree with such notions. They are interested, not only in how the female body is represented and used, but also in how the body (both female and male) is sexually, racially, socially or culturally constructed. As stated by the early feminist philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman', the gender role is basically acquired through various social and cultural forces (1949/1972: 295). Rooted in existential phenomenology, de Beauvoir's notion of 'becoming' is also interpreted as involving 'both … being created by externalities and … creating oneself' (Kruks 1998: 73). While mainstream historians have remained indifferent to the body, the politics of the body has become an important part of the feminist and sexualities agendas.

Instead of theorizing gender as a fixed, socially assigned status, Foucault (1976/1979)

contends that body and sex are discursively constituted by different forms of disciplinary knowledge, such as the family, medicine, modern science and school. In the context of these institutions, Foucault analyses the body as a site for disciplinary practices in relation to power, subjectivity and sexuality. Seeing human beings as caught up in tactics of power, Foucault (1976/1979) writes,

> We ... are in a society of "sex," or rather a society "with a sexuality": the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. Through the themes of health, progency, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke *of* sexuality and *to* sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target. (Foucault 1976/1979: 147, italics in original)

Foucault has been criticized by some feminists as being insensitive to gender differences in disciplinary institutions where discourses take place. Judith Butler (1989), for instance, challenges the notion of binary sex/gender division typified among social construction theories and the male heterosexual perspective (e.g., in Merleau-Ponty's text on the phenomenology of perception). Butler (1990) argues that it is during the body's everyday repeating 'performance' that language and linguistics inscribe gender norms. Also influenced by Foucault, Grosz (1994b) undermines the essentiality, stability, and neutrality of the body and reintroduces the importance of the experience of the material lived body. She argues that gender experience is a process mediated both by the materiality of the sexed body and by social and discursive practices. Grosz's view on the indeterminacy of the body is also reflected in her account of the reception of art. Grosz writes, 'any fixed body of receivers, any audience constitutes simply an interpretative moment in the "life" or survival of any text or artwork; reception is a provisional arrival of a text, always potentially divertable' (1994a: 144).

In general, the phenomenologist and the feminist approach the viewer's body differently, the former focusing on the philosophical unity of body, self and mind, while the latter is concerned more with the social, discursive and political significance of the body. However, both perspectives acknowledge that body and mind are not separate entities, the viewer's embodied experience, and the conditions of bodily involvement are important dimensions of museum visitors' experience of paintings. Perhaps it is time to reawaken the 'sleeping body', an image used by Kristeva (1974/1984: 13) in her discussion of repressed maternality in language and the arts.

4.4 Attitude

Are there particular attitudes of perceiving or special frames of mind that may influence museum visitors' experience of paintings? Some theorists claim that certain kinds of attitude are more likely to facilitate the unfolding of the experience.

4.4.1 Disinterestedness

In the late eighteenth century, Kant discussed the aesthetic judgement of beauty in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790/1952). He developed four criteria for judging aesthetic objects, and the first one – disinterestedness – refers to the attitude of the viewer. Kant's 'disinterestedness' meant an interest in the object alone, and the withdrawing or suppressing of all practical, moral, cognitive, religious or personal concerns that may interfere with the appreciation of what is presented. Kant wrote:

> [T]he judgement of taste is simply *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgement which is indifferent as to the existence of an object and only decides how its character stands with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. (Kant 1790/1952: 48, italics in original)

In Kantian terms, a painting should be considered in the light of its own intrinsic qualities. Kant claims that we should judge an object to be beautiful as a result of the pleasure that the object evokes. That pleasure is not a satisfaction gained from the gratification of the physical senses, using an object in a utilitarian manner or to fulfil moral requirements. It is something that 'pleases on its own account', that is, '*good in itself*' (Kant 1790/1952: 46, italics in original). There is another important concept in Kant's aesthetic theory that contributes enormously to modern aesthetics: namely, that aesthetic judgement is based on the form of the object. This concept is summarized under section §11:

> *The sole foundation of the judgement of taste is the* FORM OF FINALITY *of an object (or mode of representing it).* (Kant 1790/1952: 62)

Kant's idea of disinterestedness is crucial in the thinking of many philosophers and the development of the term almost parallels the evolution of modern aesthetics (Townsend 1997). For example, art anthropologist Jacques Maquet compares the disinterested contemplation of paintings to meditation as practised by practitioners of Yoga and followers of Buddhism, in that both aim for 'the elimination of the distractions', 'suppression of mental fluctuations', and 'detachment' (1986: 52). This comparison implies that museum visitors' experience of paintings is a sober, purifying and meditative process. According to Kant, when we adopt a disinterested attitude towards an object, then the object becomes an aesthetic object, the experience of perceiving becomes an aesthetic perception, and the pleasure derived becomes aesthetic pleasure.

Disinterestedness is a theory which emphasizes the distinction and isolation of the

'aesthetic' from the 'ordinary'. The disinterested attitude is based on the assumption that personal concerns may interfere with the understanding of a painting, thus obstructing the enjoyment of it. However, as Carroll (1999: 177) argues, 'some [artworks] enjoin interested contemplation and application to one's interested, practical affairs'. There are many cases in which we may identify our personal concerns with paintings, thus making paintings meaningful to us. Sometimes it is the emotional involvement or the imaginative identification with paintings that makes the experience memorable. There are also times when our initial interest in a painting appears to be derived from self-interest, but then later we come to enjoy it aesthetically. It would be idealistic to expect viewers to perceive with a disinterested attitude. Indeed, all of us see things through our own imaginations, dispositions, expectations, and cultural baggage. As Mitchell states, 'the innocent eye is blind', since seeing in a merely mechanical and uninformed way is a kind of blindness (1986: 118). Is an ideal audience with absolute disinterestedness possible, or even necessary? More importantly, the problem of observation versus interpretation remains unsolved. It seems that we are very much in need of an examination of the involvement of personal interest and concerns, if this is unavoidable in real-life situations, in an encounter with paintings.

4.4.2 Psychological distance

Inspired by Kant's theory, Bullough (1912) suggests that aesthetic experience is more likely to occur if one is able to abandon the utilitarian attitude that prevails in our everyday world and concentrate solely on the aesthetic qualities of objects. He contends that a proper aesthetic or psychological 'distance', in contrast to spatial and temporal distance, may be achieved:

> [T]he transformation by Distance is produced in the first instance by putting the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends – in short, by looking at it "objectively," as it has often been called, by permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasise the "objective" features of the experience. (Bullough 1912: 89)

But what is a proper distance? According to Bullough, we should neither 'over-distance' nor 'under-distance' the aesthetic phenomenon we confront; the former happens when functional or personal considerations take over perception; while the latter occurs when we become too involved and lose our awareness of the difference between the object and ourselves. Bullough does not specify whether distancing is a process that we enter into with a conscious effort or whether we just do so subconsciously, but we may infer that both are possible. For Bullough, viewers will derive the greatest amount of enjoyment from paintings if they maintain their experience in the 'nearest' distance, but without losing that distance.

4.4.3 Empathy

A theory that seems to contradict, but actually complements, the 'Distance' theory is 'empathy'. Lipps, a German psychologist, first introduced the concept of empathy in 1903. Empathy, a term translated from the German word 'einfühlung' means 'feeling into' (Mader 1979: 333). Lipps (1903/1979) explains that a perceived object, possessing certain unique sensuous qualities, may evoke certain kinds of feelings and emotions in the viewer, and the viewer will in turn project his or her feelings onto the object. According to Lipps, empathy begins when both the object and the pleasure we derive from it are drawn together in a single act. It is this mutually informing process that merges the viewer and the object into one and dissolves the antithesis between them. To empathy

theorists, if we project into or identify with the paintings we are perceiving, we shall be in a better position to understand them, and this is thus more conducive to experiencing aesthetically. Lipps describes the merging of the object and the self as follows:

> Empathy is the fact here established that the object is myself and by the very same token this self of mine is the object. Empathy is the fact that the antithesis between myself and the object disappears, or rather does not yet exist. (Lipps 1903/1979: 372)

Bullough and Lipps are indeed looking at two sides of the same coin: Bullough advises inhibiting the non-aesthetic element, while Lipps suggests elaborating on the aesthetic element (Mader 1979). The distance theory is useful in that it postulates a way to enter into aesthetic experience. By placing ourselves at an aesthetic or psychological distance from paintings, we can enjoy the work without losing our conscious awareness. However, the distance theory suffers from the same drawback as the theory of disinterestedness. If the object that we are perceiving is a painting portraying some nicely arranged daily objects, there is no great need for us to distance ourselves from it. Another problem with the distance theory is the difficulty in applying it to non-representational art. The concept of distance works well with natural phenomena and representational art. A dense fog at sea that softens the contours of all images is pleasurable to look at if we do not consider the potential danger that it may cause to a sailing ship (Bullough 1912). However, a painting such as *Black Quadrilateral* by the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich will not invite much interested attention if the viewer knows nothing about the history of Formalism or Suprematism. Some people will have already found non-representational paintings alienating; distancing is therefore not an issue. The question we need to answer perhaps is not how does one keep people at a distance, but how do people become *interested* in paintings.

Dickie (1964) attacks the distance theory as being more confusing than helpful in explaining people's experience of paintings. He argues that the concept of *attention* is more useful than that of attitude in understanding our experience of paintings. He classifies over-distancing and under-distancing as two different cases of inattention, the former attending to the functions of objects, the latter attending to the consequences of identifying with objects. Both states are in fact ways of attending to something else, not to the object. To Dickie (1997), it is much simpler to explain the over-distancing or under-distancing phenomenon as attending not to the object, but to irrelevant matters. Dickie concludes that if there is an aesthetic attitude, then attention is that attitude.

In short, the disinterested attitude and the distance theory ignore what a viewer brings to an encounter with paintings. If a theory which implies the severing of all relations between the viewer and the object is inadequate to describe museum visitors' experience of paintings, I would suggest that a study of how a museum visitor relates to the object, to others, and to the environment may yield more convincing results.

4.5 Attention

In addition to differentiating among the specific kinds of perception or attitude characterizing the experience of paintings, philosophers are also interested in the psychological states of people who are engaged in looking at paintings. Although philosophers disagree on many aspects of how we experience paintings, most of them agree that intensive attention is a prominent feature of the experience.

Heightened emotion and a concentration on the perceived object are the most widely acknowledged characteristics in writings about the experience of a work of art. Beardsley (1982a) refined the definition of the precise characteristics of aesthetic experience and suggested five criteria for identifying it. These are (1) object-directedness: attending to the art object intensively; (2) felt freedom: release from concerns about matters outside the object; (3) detached affect: feeling at a safe distance emotionally from the object; (4) active discovery: actively questing for meaning and understanding; and (5) wholeness: feeling a sense of integration, coherence and unity. Beardsley (1969) describes the moment of aesthetic experience as an attention to the formal quality of the object:

> [A] person is having an aesthetic experience during a particular stretch of time if and only if the greater part of his mental activity during that time is united and made pleasurable by being tied to the form and qualities of a sensuously presented or imaginatively intended object on which his primary attention is concentrated. (Beardsley 1969: 5)

Ginsberg (1986) recalls three cases of his own experience of beauty: experiencing the beauty in an everyday object incidentally and unexpectedly, purposely seeking beauty in a natural object, and experiencing a work of art. He claims that his experiences were marked by attention to the sensuous formal qualities or details of the object, active psychological involvement and intensive absorption. Maquet, looking from an anthropologist's perspective, also notes that 'beholding art requires attention' and that 'concentrated attention may reach the level of absorption when one becomes so engrossed in the object as to be only dimly aware of self' (1986: 32-33).

Not only philosophers, but also researchers have found that intensive attentiveness is a standard feature of museum visitors' experience of paintings. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), after studying the phenomenological accounts of experiences of works

of art by museum professionals, found that the focus of attention is a central characteristic of their encounters with works of art. They define the experience of works of art as:

> an intense involvement of attention in response to a visual stimulus, for no other reason than to sustain the interaction. The experiential consequences of such a deep and autotelic involvement are an intense enjoyment characterized by feelings of personal wholeness, a sense of discovery, and sense of human connectedness. (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 178)

From the above review, it appears that attention in museum visitors' experience of paintings may refer to two things: the first is the concentration on certain qualities of the painting; the second is the state of intensive absorption caused by looking at the painting. The attention referred to by Beardsley and Ginsberg is of the concentration kind; whereas the attention referred to by Csikszentmihalyi, Robinson and Maquet is of the absorption kind. Attention-as-absorption is closely associated with two other mental states – selflessness and will-lessness, which will be discussed in the following section.

4.6 Selflessness

Intensive attention may lead to a psychological state of selflessness. In the words of Polanyi (1958: 197): 'contemplation is a self-abandonment, it can be described either as ego-centric or as selfless'. Benson devotes a whole book, *The absorbed self*, to the descriptions and analyses of 'the experience of losing oneself when looking at a picture' (1993: ix). Philosophers and researchers suggest that we are so arrested by the paintings confronting us in the experience that we forget both where and who we are. The experience of paintings, in such a psychological state, is sometimes described as a

moment similar to a kind of religious ecstasy, in which a profound emotional disturbance and a sense of revelation are found. Hargreaves terms the aesthetic moment 'the converse trauma' (1983: 141) and discerns four key stages of such illuminating experience: (1) the powerful concentration of attention, (2) a sense of revelation, (3) inarticulateness, and (4) the arousal of appetite. Abbs (1994) carried out a related experiment by asking his MA students to write a brief account of a memorable experience with a work of art. He outlines his findings as follows:

> Aesthetic experience is *overwhelming*; it engages *powerful sensations*; it involves *feeling*; it brings a *heightened sense of significance*; but it *cannot be communicated adequately in words*; and it leaves one with *a desire for others to share it.* (Abbs 1994: 54, italics in original)

Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) also mention that the loss of ego was one fairly common experience among museum professionals recalling their aesthetic encounters. They describe the experience as follows:

> Attention is so completely focused, so completely enmeshed in the interaction with the art work, that the viewer gives up, at least momentarily, his most human attribute: self-consciousness. (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 122)

Some researchers and philosophers are convinced that people's experience of paintings is always characterized by attention that involves selfless absorption and strong emotions. However, we must note one point that is common to the research of Csikszentmihalyi, Robinson, Hargreaves and Abbs: they ask people to single out the most unforgettable instance from among all their previous experiences with art. They thus tend to portray the experience at its peak. These accounts are useful for mapping out some features of the experience, but they largely neglect experiences with art of the more ordinary kind. Examples such as these, taken from heightened experience, also overlook the active participation of viewers in making connections to personal concerns and the social

environment. If Hargreaves' or Abbs' views of museum visitors' experience of paintings are true, then what a viewer can do is limited. It seems that she can only passively wait until she encounters a completely overwhelming painting which takes over all her feelings and senses.

4.7 Discovery

Some philosophers and researchers suggest that viewers enter a seemingly involuntary and passive mental state of selflessness in an aesthetic encounter, but at the same time, they claim that it is also possible for viewers to involve themselves in an active process of personal discovery during the same encounter.

As mentioned earlier in the review, Beardsley (1982a) identifies 'active discovery' as a criterion for determining the character of aesthetic experience. He defines active discovery as:

> A sense of actively exercising constructive powers of the mind, of being challenged by a variety of potentially conflicting stimuli to try to make them cohere; a keyed-up stage amounting to exhilaration in seeing connections between percepts and between meanings, a sense (which may be illusory) of intelligibility. (Beardsley 1982a: 288-289)

By active discovery, Beardsley refers to the experience of insight into the connections and organizations of the perceived object as a result of exercising some kind of intelligence. To Beardsley, the experience of paintings, in this respect, is linked to experiences in the sciences and mathematics. In both cases, the people involved are presented with

cognitive challenges where understanding, apprehension and knowledge are evoked. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson are more explicit than Beardsley in pointing out the active involvement of viewers in an encounter with paintings. Based on findings from interviews with museum professionals, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) conclude that a process of discovery is a central component characterizing the structure of aesthetic encounters. They found that such a sense of discovery was not confined to uncovering elements of the content of the art object, but also included insights into the process of the experience and some wider human concerns.

The philosophers and researchers quoted above agree that viewers assume an active role in an encounter with a work of art. Museum visitors' inactivity during the act of looking at paintings does not necessarily mean that they are passive: they are mentally active instead. If museum visitors are actively engaged in communication with paintings, they have to be so with either their own knowledge or their own experience. Such a view indirectly acknowledges the fact that the existence of museum visitors' interestedness based on their previous knowledge and experience is linked to their personal concerns or interests. Following this line of argument, the claim of active communication contradicts the notion of a disinterested attitude. Is it possible for museum visitors to be both disinterested and interested at the same time? In Kantian terms, museum visitors are involved in the perception of paintings mainly through their faculties of understanding and imagination, but exactly how does this involvement occur, and what role does a museum visitor's personal history play in this process? The following section will discuss the role of imagination in museum visitors' experience of paintings in more detail.

4.8 Imagination

Explanations of how the imagination works are as diverse as notions of aesthetic experience. To Kant (1790/1952), an aesthetic judgement results from the interplay between two major functions of the human mind: understanding and imagination. For Kant, understanding deals with knowledge, concepts and reasoning, while imagination is concerned with sense experience, feelings and emotions. Kant further notes that the kind of pleasure derived from an aesthetic encounter possesses 'subjective universality' and 'universal communicability' (1790/1952: 51, 57), i.e., the experience of pleasure is subjective but it is communicable and universal because it involves the free play of general cognitive faculties – imagination and understanding - which are common to all human beings. It is 'free play' in the sense that it is not bound by the conceptual and logical way of thinking, knowing and perceiving that we use in everyday life.

Neville (1974) draws our attention to the fact that Kant emphasizes the active mental process of the viewer. Neville points out that viewers exercise what Kant calls 'productive imagination' in their experience of paintings. According to Kant (1790/1952), productive imagination is different from reproductive imagination; the former is the process of synthesizing discrete qualities experienced by means of the senses into a unified image, while the latter is a mere recall of qualities from past experience through causal associations. For Kant, viewers are also actively involved in a process of 'reflective judging'. By this term, Kant refers to the ability to look for the general or universal rule when particulars are given through sensation. One final involvement of viewers referred to in Kant's account of people's experience of paintings is the relating of 'material qualities' to 'formal qualities'. Material qualities are those qualities such as the

colours, sounds or odours of an object that are acquired through direct sensation without conscious effort. Formal qualities are relational qualities that are perceived through the imagination and they constitute the patterns and designs of the perceived object. In short, in Kant's discussions of aesthetic judgement, viewers are actively involved in imagining, judging, and relating, in their experience of paintings.

Dewey acknowledges imagination to be 'a special and self-contained faculty' that 'designates a quality that animates and pervades all processes of making and observation [of art]' (1934: 267). Dewey points out one aspect of imagination in particular: the power of connecting old and new experiences and the power of fusing 'inner and outer vision' (1934: 268). Imagination is functioning when 'old and familiar things are made new in experience' and 'when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world' (Dewey 1934: 267). Therefore, by making connections to our past and present experiences, imagination helps to stretch the spatial and temporal limits associated with the experience of the present object.

Analysing imagination from the perspective of modern empiricism, Scruton (1974) postulates two central characteristics of imagination. The first is that imagination is 'thought which is unasserted', and that therefore imagination 'goes beyond what is given in ordinary prediction and belief' (Scruton 1974: 97-98). 'Unasserted' here means that such thought is not committed to the truth or falsity of a proposition (Gaut 2003). The second is that imagination is a 'rational activity' that 'attempt[s] to bring what [one] says or thinks into relation with the subject' and therefore imagination is a narrative displaying a particular kind of 'appropriateness' (Scruton 1974: 98). It is these characteristics that differentiate imagination from mere fantasy or whim. Scruton further notes that

imagination involves the process of 'seeing as', which is a kind of 'unasserted visual experience' that 'goes beyond ... what is strictly given in perception' (1974:112).

Gadamer (1977/1986) acknowledges the participation of viewers in an experience of paintings in a subtle way. He explains art in terms of play. He compares art to play since both are purposeless communal activities in which people engage just for the pleasure of it. To Gadamer, art is a kind of play in which artists and the audience join together to create the meaning of works of art. He notes that in perceiving a painting, viewers are allowed room for the free play of imagination and the construction of reflective intellectual responses.

To summarize the points noted by the theorists discussed above, imagination may be seen as a kind of active creation of images and thoughts by the museum visitor during his or her experience of a painting. Such images and thoughts may not be 'true', but are somehow related to the painting that is being seen. Through the free play of imagination, a viewer is capable of projecting onto or relating to a painting his or her own thoughts, memories, and feelings. Active and creative imagination is, therefore, important not only in the creation but in the reception of paintings.

4.9 Summary

A review of the literature relating to the viewer of paintings shows that we are abundantly provided with descriptions of a particularly intensive sort of experience. There is also a

tendency to single out the museum visitor's 'sight' in the whole experience. However, the museum visitor has a body and *is also a body*, locked in a particular space and time. Another problem with these descriptions of the psychological states of viewers is their exclusive focus on the aesthetic aspect of the experience. They are very good descriptions of 'aesthetic experience' but not necessarily of 'museum visitors' experience of paintings'. Does the understanding of such heightened experiences provide us with a full picture of what actually constitutes people's experience of paintings? It seems likely that more could be found out about the experience if one did not assume in advance that this experience must necessarily be associated with beauty, joy, emotion and absorption.

Although very limited in number, there are some studies which approach museum visitors' experience of paintings in a less traditional way and which partly address the issue of non-expert viewers and the preoccupation with heightened aesthetic experience. Lachapelle (1999) studied the difference between expert and non-expert viewers in understanding works of art. He found that there was little difference in the use of psychological operations in making meaning out of artworks between the two groups. However, a noticeable difference was found in the content of the operations they used. Lachapelle concluded that non-expert informants approached artworks more through the faculty of cognition, while expert informants approached artworks more through the imagination. It should be noted that Lachapelle's study focuses only on the cognitive aspect of the experience; in addition, he employs a quantitative psychological method for his investigation.

Instead of studying the heightened experiences of museum visitors, Weltzl-Fairchild, Dufresne-Tassé and Dube (1997) examined the negative comments, which they call

'dissonance'[1], of ninety visitors to a fine art museum. Dissonance regarding information, expectations, artwork, and personal taste are identified. The researchers then suggest a number of measures that may help to resolve such dissonance: for instance, better signs and labels and the systematic collection of visitors' suggestions. Ironically, and implicitly, the study conducted by Weltzl-Fairchild and his associates still upholds the belief that heightened experience is a desirable or ideal form of museum visitors' experience of a work of art, and that therefore every effort should be made to approximate this ideal by eliminating any barriers that stand in the way of realizing it.

[1] The four kinds of dissonance identified by Weltzl-Fairchild, Dufresne-Tassé and Dube are: (1) dissonance concerning information: conflicts between what one knows and what one finds in the perceived artwork or its label, (2) dissonance regarding expectations: conflicts between what one expects and what one finds in artworks, and in the roles or organization of the museum, (3) dissonance regarding the artwork: discrepancies between form and content, and (4), dissonance relating to personal taste: conflicts arising due to personal taste in subject matter, qualities, or styles of artwork.

Chapter Five: Review of Literature – Value

5.1 Introduction

I suggest that museum visitors' experience of paintings is a valuable experience, precious to individuals and to society. However, by conceptualizing the experience differently, in particular the ways in which it contributes to individuals and to society, theorists come to value such an experience in different ways. The functionalists value the experience because it serves a number of functions, such as refining perception, and developing personal morality, social cohesiveness and cognition. By fulfilling these functions, the experience of paintings helps to bring about a better society. The pragmatists, rather than pointing to a particular function, maintain that the value of the experience lies in the enrichment of viewers' everyday lives. The essentialists value the experience itself, emphasizing the sheer joy of experiencing paintings and responding to art objects. To the essentialists, the experience is in itself a liberating experience of seeing and feeling.

5.2 Functional value

The association of art with feeling, intuition, and emotion has ancient origins. As early as ancient Greece, Aristotle discussed the strong emotions of fear and pity aroused by works of art in his *Poetics* (Pappas 2005). The romantic image of artists, the spontaneous methods of creating art, the sensuous pleasure and sometimes incomprehensible feelings

evoked by artworks, as well as the undisciplined nature of some art theories and pedagogies, have all served to reinforce such an association. It is for this reason that art has been discarded as irrational (e.g., by Plato) and has been assumed to play only a subsidiary role in the development of a person.

With the growth of the study of aesthetics since the eighteenth century (Baumgarten 1750/1986), people realized that there are two basic ways of knowing the world or interacting with reality. The first is through rational thinking, emphasizing the use of logical reasoning. The second is through non-rational feeling, emphasizing the use of senses and perception (Feagin 2003). An over-reliance on or exclusion of either one of these would be harmful for the human mind, since theoretically it would be developed in a distorted way. Since the eighteenth century, philosophers have written about the importance of art experience and the positive role played by feelings and emotions in human knowing. These thinkers (see, e.g., Arnheim 2004; Perkins 1994) argue that to deprive people of the opportunity to experience a work of art is to deny them a basic, comprehensive, and richer way of knowing the world (Bergmann 1993). Connecting the experience to Maslow's theory of self-actualizing creativity, Bersson (1982) calls for greater attention to the sensual and emotional aspect of the experience of paintings, without which a full appreciation of paintings is not possible. To Bersson, experiencing sensuously and aesthetically not only brings personal human fulfilment but also functions as social criticism in a uni-dimensional society.

5.2.1 Aesthetic knowing through intuition

A number of philosophers emphasize the view that the understanding which arises in

museum visitors' experience of paintings is different from the logical mode of comprehension associated with scientific rationality: Langer (1971: 93) advocates 'education of feeling'. By feeling, Langer (1957: 15) means 'everything that can be felt', including sensation, sensibility, emotional attitude, and our general physical or mental state, which she places in the realm of inner experiences. Langer (1971: 87) defines art as 'the practice of creating perceptible forms expressive of human feeling'. Through the use of 'non-discursive or representational symbols' (Feagin 2003: 522), art gives the subjective inner experience of the human being an objective form that can be seen, contemplated, and understood (Langer 1971). Langer argues that art forms, corresponding to formal features of human emotions, are grasped intuitively in a way that cannot be expressed using language.

Abbs (1987:1) believes that art is 'a particular form of sensuous understanding'. He suggests that we use non-linguistic symbolic forms actively to construct experience with meaning and value. However, the meaning of these non-discursive symbols is 'embedded in [its] formulation and cannot be extracted without diminution' (Abbs 1989: 35). In other words, these symbols can only be understood by responding to them as they are. After reviewing the aesthetic theories of Kant, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Dewey, and Langer, Madenfort (1975) concludes that the experience of a work of art is a knowing process that develops sensuous knowledge:

> The aesthetic itself as immediate and sensuous participates in knowledge and understanding. The concrete sensuous qualities of experience, being individual and particular, become progressively articulated as we mutely 'sing and dance' the world. The unspeakable is expressed through the most highly developed form of the immediately sensuous, namely, the arts. (Madenfort 1975: 15)

5.2.2 Aesthetic knowing through reasoning

Although agreeing that museum visitors' experience of paintings is a way of knowing, other philosophers suggest that this way of knowing is not very different from the way we know through the sciences, as both arts and sciences involve rationality and reasoning. Instead of subscribing to an intuitive mode of immediate apprehension, they formulate a different framework for understanding based on rational thinking.

Goodman (1976) emphasizes the cognitive aspect of art and states that people's experience of paintings is also a cognitive experience. For Goodman, painting is a complex system of symbolic signs and museum visitors' experience of paintings is a kind of 'cognitive experience distinguished by the dominance of certain symbol characteristics and judged by standards of cognitive efficacy' (1976: 262). He contends that the purpose of museum visitors' experience of paintings is to provide intellectual exercise, joy, communication, and most importantly, understanding; therefore paintings should be judged by how well they serve the cognitive purpose. According to Goodman (1978: 67-68), good paintings function symbolically if they possess the following characteristics: syntactic density, semantic density, repleteness, exemplificationality, and referentiality[1]. Goodman (1976: 264) argues that differences between the arts and the sciences are more differences in the 'domination of certain specific characteristics of symbols', than differences in the rationality, feeling or cognition in which they are embedded.

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[1] Syntactic density refers to the extent to which symbols are capable of differentiating themselves. Semantic density refers to the extent to which even fine differences between symbols can offer differences in meaning. Repleteness refers to the fullness of symbols participating in symbolization. Exemplificationality refers to the degree to which individual symbols stand as examples of properties of works of art. Referentiality refers to the ability of symbols to perform several integrated and interacting referential functions, directly, or mediated through other symbols.

In his book, *The Rationality of Feeling*, Best disagrees that feelings associated with artistic creation and appreciation are purely subjective emotional feelings, and claims that they are 'rational and cognitive in character' (1992: 2). For Best, feeling is different from sensation, in that feeling is cognitive in nature: we have a feeling for an object only when the object is understood, conceptualized or interpreted in a certain way. Feeling also involves reasoning, not the deductive or inductive reasoning common in science and mathematics, but interpretative reasoning. By interpretative reasoning, Best means logical interpretations and evaluations which arise in different situations and which on many occasions point to no single universal conclusion. Best declares that 'imagination, creativity, and feeling are just as important in the sciences as in the arts; and cognition, rationality, and the development of conceptual understanding are just as important in the arts as in the sciences' (1992: 10). Best insists that feeling is rational, and that we have a change of feeling because we have a different understanding.

From the perspective of an art educator, Cannatella (1996) argues that museum visitors' experience of paintings is not as subjective an experience as we have traditionally thought. After examining Kant and Wittgenstein's ideas on aesthetic activity, aesthetic experience and creative involvement, Cannatella concludes that art and design experience, which is primarily aesthetic, contributes to understanding and to the making of self-knowledge. Instead of associating the experience with subjectivity, Cannatella emphasizes the objectivity and intellectuality of the experience, and the understanding that it fosters. Like Goodman and Best, he sees that an experience of artworks has an intellectual character the same as other educational subjects, such as the sciences and technology.

Langer, Abbs and Madenfort emphasize the difference between the sciences and the arts,

and believe that the arts contribute to understanding in a unique way. By contrast, Goodman, Best and Cannatella emphasize the affinities between the arts and the sciences, claiming that the arts contribute in the same way as the sciences. However, both groups see vast opportunities for learning in and from the arts, and see understanding as central to an experience of a painting. I find a similarity between the concept of the intuitive mode of knowing and the perception theory, in that both suffer from the same kind of vagueness.

Jenks (1995: 1) remarks that, 'looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined'. Knowing and understanding through the arts have become increasingly important, especially in our time, during which a painting can sometimes be referred to as a 'text', and words combined with images are commonplace in the visual arts. Contemporary art, which plays endlessly with meanings through parody, irony and allegory (Wheale 1995: 44-46), seems to make greater demands on the audience to reflect and think. Confronted with the various perspectives offered by a contemporary painting, the audience's role in interpretation becomes increasingly important and sometimes difficult, especially since postmodern paintings make very little reference to truth or morals. I conclude that what makes museum visitors' experience of paintings important is not only the intense emotion, attention or joy it arouses, but also the knowledge and understanding gained during the experience, the reasoning behind such understanding, and how these relate to experiences in learning and in life.

5.3 Pragmatic value

The pragmatists emphasize the instrumental worth of museum visitors' experience of paintings. Instead of pinpointing specific functions that art experience serves, pragmatic theorists claim that the experience satisfies in a general sense. Jackson (1998), in discussing the aesthetics of Dewey, notes the value of interactions with art objects:

> The arts do more than provide us with fleeting moments of elation and delight. They expand our horizons. They contribute meaning and value to future experience. They modify our ways of perceiving the world, thus leaving us and the world irrevocably changed. (Jackson 1998: 33)

Shusterman (2000) notes that by fulfilling a variety of ends, such as invigorating and vitalizing our minds, sharpening our senses and communication, museum visitors' experience of paintings assumes a spillover into our everyday thought and action:

> But what exactly does the importation of art and its aesthetic principle into the realm of ordinary living actually mean for Dewey? ... Part of the story would be a more energetic and attentive cultivation of the diverse practical arts of living (which include the social, political, and technological arts), with greater emphasis on qualities of harmony, creativity, and imagination and with a better integration of means and ends, so that more of life's activities are pursued with immediate satisfaction rather than under the mere hope of remotely deferred and externally related enjoyment. (Shusterman 2000: 289)

The pragmatists also see the importance of knowledge generated in the experience of paintings, not for the truth it represents, but for being 'instrumental to the enrichment of immediate experience through the control over action that it exercises' (Dewey 1934: 290). The functionalists view the experience as a means to some valuable ends, while the pragmatists see the experience as a valuable means as well as a valuable end in itself. Shusterman (2000) gives two examples of integrating a means with an end:

> The means of painting (its colors, lines, and representational forms) are not simply external causal conditions of the consummatory end of aesthetic experience; they are integral ingredients of it. The smooth handling and surging speed of a sports car are at once an instrumentality and a source of

immediate satisfaction in the experience of driving. (Shusterman 2000: 50)

Museum visitors' experience of painting, according to this view, would to a large extent refer to what the essentialist means by a total integration of means and ends in one joyful experience.

5.4 Essential value

To the essentialists, the value of the experience does not lie in helping us to understand the world or to acquire knowledge of forms and cultural traditions. The value of experiencing paintings lies in the fact that it brings pleasure spiritually; it is meaningful as an end in itself, not as a means to satisfy other human desires. From such a perspective, the value of the experience of paintings lies in itself and its powerful fulfilling nature, not in something external. The essentialists' main claim is that we enjoy looking at paintings because of the immediate and absorbing pleasure that the experience brings. They also note that the pleasure produced is different from that derived from the satisfaction of our pragmatic desires. Aesthetic pleasure can be repeated again and again without producing a feeling of satiation. It is closely related to Kant's disinterested attitude. For Kant (1790/1952), the experience of paintings is a disinterested judgement of an object's capacity to offer pleasure to the viewer.

Beardsley uses the term 'gratification' to describe the pleasure, delight or satisfaction derived from the experience of paintings (1982b: 22). Smith (1989), in discussing

Beardsley's concept, defines such pleasure as a state of mind constituting a significant realization of human value. This distinctive form of human well-being is not found in ordinary activities. Elaborating on Beardsley's account of aesthetic pleasure, Collinson (1992) differentiates *pleasure in* from a direct *response to* paintings. Collinson notes that immediate experiences with paintings may range from grief to terror, dread to melancholy, or from rejoicing to amusement. However, the ultimate aesthetic pleasure that lies behind such responses is 'a delight in a new clarity, a broadening or deepening or enrichment of sensibilities' and an 'understanding of meanings and realities that are of great importance in human life' (Collinson 1992: 171-172)

Fenner (1996) carried out a detailed review of the history and development of the aesthetic attitude and proposes a new account that makes pleasure central to the concept. He defines the new aesthetic attitude as follows:

> For one to adopt that attitude sufficient for production of an aesthetic experience is for that individual to adopt the attitude of *expectation of a return on the investment of attention paid to the object, or event,* under consideration. This return takes the form of *pleasure*, with 'pleasure' herein properly defined. (Fenner 1996: 112, italics in original)

Fenner's view of the pleasure in paintings is similar to Beardsley's. He calls the direct or immediate response to paintings 'first-order' pleasure, while the pleasure of simply attending to the object he calls 'second-order' pleasure. To Fenner, there may be cases where a viewer derives no first-order pleasure from a painting but may feel pleasure in the experience of attending to the object, i.e., second-order pleasure. For Fenner, it is the expectation that an object may bring first and second-order pleasure that gives rise to the viewer's aesthetic attitude.

5.5 Summary

The review in this chapter shows that most theorists value museum visitors' experience of paintings, but in different ways. As a teacher-educator, I would like to point out that what is implied in the discussion of the value of experiencing paintings is that it is a meaningful activity embodying a pedagogical value. Among the three different claims regarding the value of the experience, the pragmatist claim of gains in everyday experience has been the least mentioned and researched, though it is certainly not the least valuable. There has been little investigation of how museum visitors' experience of painting is linked to everyday life and specifically to everyday situations such as those in a teaching and learning environment. We do not understand fully how people's experience of paintings is related to the experiencing person. A related study, on the everyday cultural practices and art experiences of 'ordinary people' who had no special training or expertise in art, was carried out by Mullen (1995). Studying adults and family groups with diverse economic and cultural backgrounds through photographs and interviews, Mullen found that the aesthetic values of ordinary people are affected by their socio-economic status, although these values are rarely articulated. Most of the participants in her study indicated that they were 'just ordinary people' and they seldom talked about their aesthetic experiences. She suggests that cultural institutions such as museums have to connect their educational function to the life experiences of 'ordinary citizens', in order to help them to articulate and validate their own aesthetic values and practices.

5.6 Conclusions to the literature review

From the review of the literature presented in chapters two, three, four and five, it appears that museum visitors' experience of paintings is an experience in which, on the one hand, we are detached from our utilitarian attitudes of everyday life, and on the other hand, in which we are so fully engaged that we lose our sense of self-awareness. The difference between the modernist and postmodernist theorists' conceptualizations of the experience lies partly in their different views regarding the meaning, function and significance of paintings, the amount of detachment and interpretation involved in the experience, and the role and participation of the viewer during the experience. Detachment here refers to both the isolation of the object from its historical context and the isolation of viewers from their own personal and cultural practices. To some theorists, museum visitors' experience of paintings is valuable as a means as well as an end. When viewed as a means, the experience brings understanding and knowledge; when viewed as an end, it is pleasure in itself.

Dominating the discussion of people's experience of paintings, philosophers working in the analytic tradition have been preoccupied with distinguishing such an experience from ordinary experience, with distinguishing affection from cognition, art from non-art, and a disinterested from an interested attitude. They attempt to produce an unambiguous definition of what the experience of art is and what it is not. Analytic aesthetics is basically a process of what Gadamer calls 'aesthetic differentiation', ignoring 'extra-aesthetic elements … such as purpose, function, the significance of [its] content' (1965/2004: 74). These distinctions highlight some fundamental aspects of the experience, and the clarity of these distinctions seems to make inquiry into and discourse

on the experience possible, but in actual fact they compartmentalize the whole phenomenon. Modernist or analytic theorists are also attacked for their tendency towards dichotomization: polarizing the actual lived experience into incompatible phenomena. The analytic concept of 'aesthetic experience' does not take into account the connections and contextualization of various elements involved in an encounter with paintings, and appears to ignore the dynamics of human experience and interaction. The review shows that some of our existing beliefs about the experience of paintings are heavily influenced by the modernist approach and that our understanding of the experience is limited to certain perspectives.

In view of these limitations, I would suggest that we need to free our understanding of museum visitors' experience of paintings from the exclusive focus on and strong inclination towards seeing such an experience as a visual experience. A painting, inarguably, is a visual object, but it offers much more than merely visual pleasure. From a postmodern perspective, we interpret rather than just see a painting. Instead of engaging only with the visual aspects of paintings, a process which the modernist believes is common to every individual's experience, we interpret and make sense of paintings using experiences derived from the environments in which we grow up, learn, and socialize. Postmodernist theorists have drawn our attention to the socio-cultural environment in which paintings are created and looked at. Contexts such as institutions, gender, power relations, cultural conventions, intellectual traditions, social class, economic status and even physical settings all have an impact on how we understand and receive paintings.

The various contexts supplied by museums exert an important influence over their

visitors' experience. The physical environment of a museum frames the experience of its visitors by creating, on the one hand, an enclosing and safe environment in which to rest and concentrate on exhibits, and on the other hand, an imposing authoritative environment inspiring a sense of awe. Socially and culturally speaking, museums can be places where ideologies are disseminated in subtle ways. Visitors are influenced by what is presented at a museum; however, they can exercise a certain degree of autonomy and negotiate using their own personal backgrounds. The educational function of museums is increasingly important, evident in the growing interest in and concern with museum visitors' experience. Assuming simultaneously a number of different roles, the museum is a complex institution where complex interactions between visitors and paintings take place.

Instead of studying museum visitors' experience of paintings as an abstract, analytic or philosophical concept, I propose that the experience be studied from the perspective of pragmatic aesthetics, emphasizing its experiential nature and its connections with daily experiences. To the pragmatic theorists, museum visitors' experience of paintings is neither a concept nor an object, but consists of the dynamic interactions that take place between the viewer and the painting. It is important to understand the experience from the connections made between it and other lived experiences. From the pragmatic aesthetic point of view, museum visitors' experience of paintings will assume continuity with their everyday experience. It is this link that makes the experience a meaningful and memorable experience. The principal value of this study lies in its examination of museum visitors' experience of paintings from the point of view that the experience is connected to, rather than isolated from, their daily lives.

I would suggest that the long history of the development of painting has resulted in paintings having many more facets than just a pure form. It is thus important that we acknowledge the variety of roles that paintings play in our societies, in addition to being simply constellations of visual forms, there for the sake of contemplation, enjoyment and pleasure. 'Within the last thirty years art historians have become increasingly concerned with theoretical issues about the political, cultural, and moral functions of paintings' (Feagin 2003: 516). It should be recognized that paintings, which have always been regarded by expressionists as vehicles for feeling, actually fulfil a bigger and more complicated function – that of vehicles of meaning. To Marxist or feminist theorists, the gender, political, social and cultural aspects of paintings are as important as, if not more important than the purely visual aspect. For some postmodern theorists, paintings are complicated constructions in which signs and symbols work in socially determined ways to produce meanings. Museum visitors have to understand how these signs work in order to understand paintings.

When museum visitors are engaged with paintings, perception, vision and concentration seem to be important aspects of their psychological states. However, I suggest that we need to understand the experience as an embodied experience, rather than seeing it as a purely cognitive experience involving our minds, or as a purely visual experience involving only our eyes. From a phenomenological point of view, we experience with our whole body and we experience paintings in the same way, no differently from how we experience the everyday world. We know that attention is one key feature of people's engaging with works of art, but we have little information or inconclusive findings on other modes of involvement. A museum visitor's interest, concern, and expectation, rather than a disinterested attitude on his or her part, help us better understand an

encounter with paintings in a museum. The loss of self and inarticulateness, salient features of an aesthetic encounter, deserve better elucidation, exploring them preferably from a phenomenological and hermeneutic perspective. Museum visitors' experience of paintings would be better seen as a joint engagement of our intellect, vision and body in experiencing one facet of life or the world.

In general, there are at least three areas which remain unexplored: the nature and role of personal involvement in the experience of paintings, the experience of non-art specialists, and the relationship between the experience and ordinary life.

Personal orientation and contribution

This review has shown that a number of philosophers suggest that viewers should perceive paintings with a disinterested attitude. From this perspective, any personal interest museum visitors bring to the encounter prevents them from focusing exclusively on what is present to the senses. In an extreme situation, viewers will assume a state of selflessness. Such a view of the experience ignores the viewers' contribution and participation in an encounter with paintings. It reduces viewers to the status of passive recipients of whatever the painting may deliver. Such a view also ignores the viewers, as individual members of a society, with their own preferences, expectations, aesthetic values and cultural practices. A viewer's orientation will have a profound influence on how he or she is going to perceive a painting. If we accept that what a viewer does and what he or she brings to an encounter with a painting is a vital part of the experience, then we do not need a universal depiction of how people contemplate a painting, but contextualized descriptions showing how individuals actively interact with and construct their experience of paintings.

Experience of people without art training

The review has shown that our current understanding of how museum visitors experience paintings is largely built upon the experiences of a particular group of people with particular kinds of artwork. What is referred to as museum visitors' experience of paintings is generally the elevated experience of a qualified observer with paintings of excellent quality. However, such museum visitors' responses represent only a small proportion of the many possibilities. The belief that museum visitors' experience of paintings is always positive, pleasant and desirable further confines our attempts to understand the phenomenon by predetermining the direction of inquiry. If we want to understand museum visitors' experience fully, we should not limit our investigation to the heightened or 'aesthetic' experience of art specialists. The fixation on only one aspect of the experience, rather than an examination from various angles and perspectives, gives us an extremely narrow view. What we need is an enriched description of the experience, not just highly selective examples. In order to widen our scope of understanding of the phenomenon, we should investigate what people who are non-art specialists experience. We should also set aside our many preconceptions and view the phenomenon with openness and freshness.

The relationship between experience and living

According to the claims of the modernists, museum visitors' experience of paintings is a unique experience that is marked by its self-completeness and separateness from mundane activities. Definitions that have been examined seem to suggest that when the magic of the experience is over, viewers will resume their ordinary practical attitudes and continue to work or play as usual. If the powerful experience described by philosophers and researchers referred to in previous chapters is authentic, then it will certainly make a

difference to the living experience of the viewer. 'In the experience of art we see a genuine experience induced by the work,' Gadamer writes, 'which does not leave him who has it unchanged' (1965/2004: 86). However, the academic community has been more interested in knowing what happens during the immediate experience of a painting, than in knowing how this experience assumes continuity with, or how it is related to, other lived experience. This study examines the relevance of museum visitors' experience of paintings to selected aspects of living, the spilling over of the experience into ordinary activities, and the ways in which the experience is found meaningful in individual life.

Before closing this review, I would like to explain why a study of museum visitors' experience of paintings is important, especially at a time when we place so much more hope and interest in the development of science and technology for the future of human well-being and progress, compared with our interest in the authentic lived experience of human beings. Habermas claims that modernity is 'an incomplete project' (1983: 3). He suggests that one way to complete the project is to relate the experience of a work of art to an individual's own life problems. He noted that the reception of art in the past was framed exclusively by art experts or professional critics. By drawing the experience of the work of art into an individual's life history and using it to illuminate a life-historical situation, he notes that the experience not only renews the ways in which we perceive the world, but also permeates our cognitive significations and normative expectations. For Habermas, the reappropriation of art from the hands of the specialists to the standpoint of the life-world rekindles hopes of perceiving art in an illuminating way. To halt the withering of our experience of paintings in a technocratic and dehumanizing society is to recognize their actively involving nature, to understand them from the point of view of

the experiencing person, and to expand the meaning of the experience into every aspect of our lives.

Chapter Six: Methodology

6.1 Introduction

The method we use to conduct research not only affects the outcome of the investigation, but also reflects how we see the world. Phenomenology is the philosophical as well as the methodological framework used in this study. Phenomenology is a twentieth-century philosophical movement, which may be differentiated from positivist methods and theories typical of natural sciences. In contrast to positivism, phenomenology insists on the 'priority of significance to fact, relation to substance, and understanding to knowledge' (Weinsheimer 1985: 5). It is also a qualitative research methodology used to study questions of human experience and meaning in a variety of human science disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, and health care.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) identify two major approaches to inquiry, namely quantitative and qualitative, each rooted in distinct paradigms. A paradigm is 'a set of overarching and interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality' (Maykut and Morehouse 1994: 4). These assumptions are manifested in people's beliefs, values, and practices, thus forming their 'conceptual and operational approach to functioning in the world' (Pearse 1992: 244). Quantitative methods or the methods used by natural scientists to conduct research about the world are usually located within a positivist paradigm. Such methods are typified by control and objectivity, observation and experiments, quantifiable variables and data, standardized measurements and statistical analysis, concerns over reliability and validity, and explanation and prediction (Maykut and

Morehouse 1994). Generally, within the positivist paradigm, the world is believed to be one simple reality, knowledge is independent from the knower and can be examined in parts, linkages between events are believed to be causal and unidirectional, research outcomes are verifiable, explanations are generalizable, and researchers are capable of working from a position of neutrality and objectivity (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Maykut and Morehouse 1994). The positivist paradigm has dominated the field of natural science inquiry and has been extended to the fields of social and human sciences. However, recent development in research methodology, particularly in the social and human sciences, indicates a shift towards what has variously been called the 'interpretive-hermeneutic' paradigm (Pearse 1992: 245), the 'naturalistic paradigm' (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 37), the 'postpositivist' paradigm (Lather 1991: 9) or the 'alternate paradigm' (Maykut and Morehouse 1994: 11). Within this emerging paradigm, researchers employ qualitative methods of inquiry, and the world is believed to be composed of multiple interconnected realities, knowledge is co-constituted, the knower and the known cannot be separated, and events are mutually shaped and their relations are multidirectional. In addition, researchers are influenced by their own beliefs and values, and are thus perspectival rather than objective, and research findings are contextual rather than universal (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Maykut and Morehouse 1994).

This chapter contains a discussion of the methodology that I have used for the study of museum visitors' experience of paintings. First, the philosophical framework in which the study is situated is outlined, with special reference to epistemological and ontological perspectives. Then the research methodology, phenomenology, is examined. In particular I will outline how the study is informed by the existential and hermeneutic traditions of phenomenology. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues related

to reliability and validity and the significance of the methodology for the study.

6.2 Philosophical framework

This study is based on the epistemological assumption that knowledge comes from experience and the ontological assumption that reality is an inseparable unity of the self and the world. Working within such a philosophical framework, this study follows a phenomenological method, that has been informed by hermeneutic and existentialist principles, in collecting and interpreting data.

6.2.1 Epistemological context

Epistemological theories, or theories of how knowledge is obtained and constituted, tend to place themselves somewhere on the continuum between two extremes (Hein 1998). At one extreme is Realism, a school of thought that conceives of knowledge as something that exists externally, independent of human mind and context. Knowledge, the realist tradition insists, is a relatively stable body of constructs that exists by itself. At the other end of the continuum is Idealism. This school of thought conceives of knowledge as something that exists only in our minds (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Williamson 1995). Under the aegis of such thinking, knowledge is unique to each person and is subjective, relative, interpretive, and contextual in nature.

The present study adopts the phenomenological view of knowledge, that is, a position

between the two extremes. Knowledge, from a phenomenological point of view, whether knowledge of oneself or knowledge of the world, is generated from personal experience. Therefore, knowledge is viewed as experiential knowledge, with an emphasis on the personal perspective. Becker (1992) highlights the validity of making human experiences the primary source of knowledge:

> [E]xperience is a valid and fruitful source of knowledge. ... Experience ... is the foundation of our knowledge of ourselves, other people, and the world in general. Without human experience, there would be no human world. Rather than distrust human experience, as many social scientists do, phenomenologists see experience as the cornerstone of knowledge. (Becker 1992: 10-11)

What is the nature of human experience if it is so important to the founding of knowledge? One central theme of phenomenology is the intentionality of consciousness. 'Intentional' here does not mean that we do something on purpose. It means that our consciousness has a certain kind of object-directedness, or to put it differently, our consciousness is directed towards something. 'All thinking (imagining, perceiving, remembering, etc.)', writes van Manen, 'is always thinking about something' (1997: 182). Therefore, our consciousness or experience exists only in relation to something in the world, rather than existing by itself. It implies that the object being experienced and the experiencing person are virtually indivisible and that they *co-constitute* each other (Valle, King and Halling 1989). In the words of Stewart and Mickunas, 'there is an indissoluble unity between the conscious mind and that of which it is conscious' (1990: 9).

Human experience is 'not a static thing', but 'a sensibly changing perspectival relatedness to the conditions, possibilities, and constraints of the world' (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 28-29). Human experience, like knowledge, is dialectic and contextual in nature. Phenomenologists consider experience not only in terms of the experiencing

person or the experienced object, but also in terms of the context in which the experience takes place. Every person and experience is treated as unique. However, it is when examining the unique that we are able to see the essential structure of the experience. Within every unique experience, there is something that points to a part or parts, but not all, of the nature of the experience. We cannot simply add up all these unique experiences mathematically in order to obtain a full picture of what the experience is.

Human experience is perceived as continuous. For each current experience, we take into account previous experience. Therefore, a recollection of past experience will not be the same as that which actually happened in the past for we see the previous experience in the context of the current experience. The life-world where human experience actually takes place is pre-reflective or '*before*-reflective' (Valle, King, and Halling 1989:10, italics in original) in nature. This pre-reflective or pre-theoretical nature of the life-world renders human experience the primary source of knowledge to be studied (Becker 1992).

This study examines museum visitors' lived experience of paintings, and the focus is on how people experience a common form of visual culture in everyday life. In contrast to the Realist emphasis on knowledge about the painting or the Idealist emphasis on the emotions of the viewer, this study seeks to understand the experience of paintings as a lived experience, as an experience having a 'determinate meaningful aspect of life' (van Manen 1997: 38). The study respects the uniqueness of the experience of every person, while at the same time, searches for common themes among these unique experiences.

6.2.2 Ontological context

Ontological theories are concerned with the form and nature of reality. As with epistemological theories, ontologically there are two ways to approach reality. For some, reality exists 'out there', for others, reality only exists in our minds. From a phenomenological perspective, reality neither exists independently nor resides within our minds, but is perceived by the individual. Perception here does not mean the mere grasping of sense data through our sense organs, but refers to a process that is loaded with meanings and interpretations; hence '[p]erception always includes meaning' (Gadamer 1965/2004: 80). Phenomenologically speaking, we can only understand our existence in terms of the relation between ourselves and the world. Heidegger (1927/1976) uses the term 'being-in the-world' to highlight the fact that a human being is always considered in the world, and the world is always considered with human beings in it. Therefore, 'human being' is not just 'being', but 'being with', a term used by Heidegger to suggest that we are always being with something or somebody: in other words, Heidegger is referring to the constitutive determination of being an individual in the world (Burch 1990: 139). The relationship between the human being and the world is reciprocal: human action defines meaning and the context of the world, but at the same time, the world context constitutes meaning and sets limits to human action (Laverty 2003; Stewart and Mickunas 1990).

The life-world is the background to all experience, and human experience should be considered as situated in its life-world context rather than in isolation from it. The situatedness of a phenomenon, or what Heidegger (1927/1976) refers to as 'facticity', means that 'we are always already in a situation, always in a mood, always of a history, culture and language, embodied, male or female, and so on' (DeRoberts 1996: 24). The

concept of the life-world is further elaborated by existential phenomenology, which often describes experience as taking place in four existential dimensions: 'lived space, lived body, lived time, and lived human relation' (van Manen 1997:101).

Conventionally speaking, time refers to the intervals that we use to divide the year, so that we have months, days, hours, minutes, and seconds. It is such a description of time that allows us to arrange daily events, communicate with others and plan for the future. Time also assumes a linear quality, in the sense that we have the past behind us, the present at this moment, and the future before us. Phenomenology portrays a different picture of temporality: time experienced is different from actual time. Sometimes we find time passes quickly when we are enjoying ourselves: for example, when we are involved in an after-dinner chat with one or two close friends, midnight suddenly arrives without our having noticed. But on other occasions, such as when we are jammed uncomfortably in the cabin of an airplane, we find that time passes very slowly. Phenomenologically speaking, there is only one time – the present. Expressed succinctly in the words of Burch, it is 'the present act of recollection that appropriates and reenacts a past in the anticipation of a future' (1990: 146). Although we remember the past, it is in the present that the past is remembered. It is also in the present that the future is envisioned.

In our daily usage, space refers to the physical space that we can measure. From a phenomenological perspective, space is something more than the room in which we live, the distance from home to office, or our waist measurement. Phenomenologically, space refers to experiential space. We may experience a feeling of vastness or emptiness even though we are in a crowded city. It is not unusual to read a book and find ourselves transported to the place described in it, although we are actually sitting on a couch at

home (Becker 1992). Sometimes we say that we need a wider space in which to grow. Certainly, this could mean that we need more physical space in which we can stretch out our bodies, but it may also refer to a wider mental and social space in which we will be free to think and act.

From a phenomenological point of view, the body is neither 'the thing body' nor 'the spiritual body', but 'the immediately experienced and experiencing, lived and living body of everyday life' (Moss and Keen 1989: 112). In most of our experiences, we forget our bodies and the only thing that comes to our consciousness is the thing that we are thinking, doing or seeing. Understood phenomenologically, mind and body are one, and 'human beings both have a body and are a body' (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 5). It would be wrong to view the body as a 'thing' and attempt to understand it as an object. 'Bodies are thoughtful bodies just as minds are embodied minds' (Becker 1992: 16). This view that the body is a 'knowing-body' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962: 408) contrasts with the dualistic view of the mind versus the body, typical of Cartesian thinkers.

The existential dimension of lived human relations refers to the ways in which we experience and relate to other people in our day-to-day interactions. Phenomenologically speaking, to live is to live in relation to others. The world in which we find ourselves is also populated with others. Others are parts of our being. It is other people who make up our presence. Our body is free to act, but within limitations imposed by others, and by animate and inanimate objects, as well as by time and place. We are constantly reminded that there are others in the world, no matter how solitary we are. According to Nowell's phenomenological study (1997), we are particularly aware of the presence of others when we find a significant difference between ourselves and others. Sometimes others are

experienced as an extension of ourselves when we find them helpful, but there are also times when others are experienced as a hindrance or threat.

6.2.3 Summary

Ontologically speaking, human experience constitutes reality and reality is made up of the things that come to our experience. Thus, the present study starts with museum visitors' *lived experience* of paintings. The emphasis of phenomenology on the life-world and on the contextuality and historicity of experience provides the present study with a broad horizon, as well as with a direction. It widens the scope of the present study by relating museum visitors' experience of paintings to the wider context that constitutes the experience. Although time, space, body, and relation are not the only categories that may be used to contextualize experiencing paintings, it is these existential dimensions that have been used to provide the study with systematic guidelines for phenomenological reflection and writing.

6.3 Methodology

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological research methodology. The study is qualitative because it uses a descriptive, interpretative and naturalistic approach to gather data, interpret phenomena, analyse words, and create meanings from a relatively small number of cases. Although a number of basic phenomenological postulates have been presented in the above discussion on epistemology and ontology, phenomenology as a

methodology requires a more systematic introduction.

6.3.1 Phenomenology

The word *phenomenology* comes from two Greek words: *phainomenon*, which means 'an appearance', and *logos*, which means 'reason' or 'word' (Stewart and Mickunas 1990). The word *phainomenon* derives from a Greek verb which means showing oneself (Moran 2000: 229). Hence, phenomenology is a reasoned inquiry into the inherent essences of appearance accomplished by a skilful use of language to allow things to reveal themselves. Its philosophical origin can be traced back to Hegel and particularly to Husserl and his followers, including Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Moustakas 1994). Since the inauguration of 'the phenomenological movement' (Spiegelberg 1982: 2) at the turn of the twentieth century, a great diversity of approaches under the rubric of phenomenology have emerged. Transcendental phenomenology, with Husserl as the principle expounder, existential phenomenology, inspired by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, and hermeneutic phenomenology, largely influenced by Gadamer in addition to the aforementioned thinkers, are three basic strands of phenomenology. I will not attempt to draw a detailed picture of each branch or 'expression' of phenomenology. Instead, in the discussion below I will examine some of the differences and commonalities between them.

A hermeneutic- existentialist study

It is clear that phenomenology consists of a group of related yet distinct theories. Having the same philosophical origin, all three traditions, i.e., transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic phenomenology, are bounded by the concept of intentionality. For each of

these branches of phenomenology, an orientation towards the object of consciousness is an essential feature of human being, and therefore they all emphasize 'the inseparable connectedness of the human being to the world' (van Manen, 1997: 181). All three approaches see human experience as the ultimate source of knowledge and are interested in human experience in the world of everyday life. In addition, all three approaches rely on descriptions of lived experience as the basis for understanding the meanings of phenomena.

This study may be described as hermeneutic and existentialist in nature. Drawing on existentialist phenomenology, the individual in this study is seen as occupying 'a central place from which meaning and value radiate' (Stewart and Mickunas 1990: 67-68). It is from this premise that existential phenomenology emphasizes the life-world of everyday experiences and the role of active, involved bodily experience in generating human knowledge. The main difference between existential phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology is that the former is interested in 'existence as experienced by man as an individual' whereas the latter is interested in 'the issues of essence' (Spinelli 1989: 105).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is more concerned with the search for understanding, meaning, contextualization, and interpretation, in addition to identifying the essential structures of experience. The word 'hermeneutic' comes from the name of the Greek deity, *Hermes*, who delivers messages from the gods to mortals on earth and is vested with the powers of prophecy and fertility (Smith 1991: 187). By engaging in a dynamic, spiralling, and reflective 'hermeneutic circle' of 'relating parts of the whole and whole to the parts' (Parse 2001: 53), researchers 'become spokespersons and messengers for the meanings that demand to be articulated' (Von Eckarsberg 1986: 134). Moules (2002)

describes the hermeneutic cycle as

> the generative recursion between the whole and the part. Being in the circle is disciplined yet creative, rigorous yet expansive. There is an inherent process of immersion in, and dynamic and evolving interaction with, the data as a whole and the data in part, through extensive readings, re-readings, reflection, and writing. (Moules 2002: 30)

Relying less on transcendental reduction or on the elimination of preconceptions and prejudgments which are typical of transcendental phenomenology, and more on reflection and interpretation, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the revealing of the essential structure of a phenomenon by 'pointing to', instead of 'pointing out' the meaning of a particular kind of experience (Gadamer 1977/1986: 68). Van Manen (1997) explains that 'pointing to' is to make things articulate in their own setting while 'pointing out' is to make explicit the meanings of things. Sensitivity to language and attention to writing are other characteristics of hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a methodological approach which is an extension of the continental tradition of human science research. In education, it has been used to study phenomena such as childhood secrecy (van Manen and Levering 1996), drawing (Montgomery-Whicher 1997b), the student-teacher pedagogic relationship (Goode 2000), art-making experiences of creative children (Brown 2003), co-operative education (Groenewald 2004), and teaching for social justice (Pigza 2005).

Differences in philosophical assumptions have resulted in different orientations in methodological practices among different branches of phenomenology. Regarding the source of data, transcendental and existential phenomenology look to people's first-person reports of experience obtained from long interviews (Moustakas 1994; Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997). In hermeneutic phenomenology, data are found in a much

wider spectrum of sources which includes, but is not confined to, interviews. The researcher's personal experiences, etymological and idiomatic sources, as well as experiential descriptions obtained from interviews, observations, and literature such as novels, autobiographies, diaries, and journals, are all sources of data (van Manen 1997).

For the collection of data, transcendental and existential phenomenologists employ procedures which resemble those of empirical science, with an emphasis on the selection of participants, participants' validation of data, group evaluation of interpretation, and the integrity of all data obtained (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 104-105). Comparatively speaking, the data collection procedures of hermeneutic phenomenology are less formal, but equally rigorous. During the process of data analysis, transcendental phenomenology places the principal emphasis on 'bracketing': that is, 'a suspension of theoretical beliefs, preconceptions, and presuppositions' (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 47). In the existential and hermeneutic approaches, complete bracketing is seen as impossible, since the world and the self are bounded by contextuality and historicity. As noted by Barritt et al., 'our ideas, our procedures, our analyses, are inescapably historically based' (1983: 139). Although all three traditions make reflection and the search for meanings an indispensable process, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the authorship of the researcher and his or her authority to interpret. Hermeneutic phenomenology pays special attention to the phenomenological text, the writing process, and the ways in which language speaks. 'Hermeneutic phenomenological research', writes van Manen, 'is fundamentally a writing activity' and 'research and writing are aspects of one process' (1997: 7).

It is important not to over-emphasize the differences among the various orientations of

phenomenological methods. Some of the differences between them are differences of principle, but more are differences of degree. After all, 'transcendental, existential and hermeneutic branches belong to the same tree' (Barritt et al. 1983: 56-57). This study will adopt the basic assumptions of phenomenology in general and look to existential and hermeneutic phenomenology for methods of data collection, reflection, thematic interpretation and presentation in particular. For the methodological background of the study, I examined the work of Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) on phenomenological interviews and issues related to the validity of phenomenological studies. I have frequently consulted van Manen's *Researching Living Experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (1997) throughout the process of research and writing, especially in formulating data collection and analysis procedures. I have attempted to conduct a study that uses rigorous and systematic procedures and one that produces high quality results in well-chosen words.

Essence and universality

Phenomenologists acknowledge that there is a certain degree of universality: a basic structure within a phenomenon that makes a phenomenon what it is and without which it could not be that phenomenon (van Manen 1997). Phenomenologists of the transcendental tradition claim that we are able to grasp the structural essences of experiences through the uses of reductive measures and behind this claim lies the supposition of inter-subjective validity. Existential and hermeneutic phenomenologists also search for universal essences (Parse 2001). Van Manen states that 'phenomenological research is the study of essences' and 'the essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon' (1997: 10).

However, I must note that the phenomenological claim of universality is different from those 'laws' of empirical science derived from observations and measurement which can be generalized to all situations. Stewart and Mickunas (1990) provide a good description of what essence is:

> But this eidos or essence was not conceived by him [Husserl] as a transcendent idea in the Platonic sense, an innate idea in the Cartesian sense, or a mental construction as Kant would have it. Neither is it identical with the empirical object. Husserl spoke of the eidos as a priori, but by this he did not mean that it was supplied solely by the mind prior to empirical experience but rather that it is an ability to have an insight prior to empirical experience which is then fulfilled or "fleshed out" by experience. In short, the eidos is the "essential possibility" without which experience would be impossible. (Stewart and Mickunas 1990: 40)

Van Manen further notes that 'essence is not a single, fixed property by which we know something; rather, it is meaning constituted by a complex array of aspects, properties and qualities – some of which are incidental and some of which are more critical to the being of things' (1997: xv). In the present study, 'essence' is articulated in themes developed from particular instances of the experience being studied.

6.3.2 Phenomenological research method

Although the philosophical origin of phenomenology makes a phenomenological research method more of an attitude than a method (van Manen 1997), there are still some procedures that mean that phenomenology is as systematic, rigorous and capable of producing meaningful results as any other established research method. Moran argues that phenomenology is 'a *radical* way of doing philosophy, a *practic*e rather than a system' (2000: 4, italics in original). The following section will focus on techniques that are common among phenomenological studies, and on how they are used in this study.

Phenomenological research employs a qualitative method that seeks to understand the lived meaning of events or phenomena which people experience in particular situations. Phenomenological descriptions, naturalistic and empathic in nature, can be descriptions of unique experiences or experiences in general, but are most likely to be descriptions of experiences of the same category, such as experiences of paintings in a museum (Moss and Keen 1989). 'What is sought by both existentialism and phenomenology is a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity' (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 5). Phenomenological descriptions are different from ordinary descriptions that serve as inventories of 'facts' (the observable), or from 'photo-realistic' descriptions that reproduce all the features of an object or event in minute detail, or from literary descriptions that fantasize about the phenomenon with free associations and fabrications. Phenomenological descriptions, according to Sokolowski, describe 'an object not in terms of special features that it has, but in terms of the ways in which it can be experienced' (1985: 16). A phenomenological description therefore aims to describe modes of experience and the ways in which this experience are presented, not merely the content of what is experienced. Sokolowski further suggests that phenomenological descriptions should pay attention to the dimensions of presence and absence, sameness and otherness, and motion and rest.

The aim of phenomenological research is not to confirm theoretical hypotheses or to conform to existing theories, but to let the phenomena speak for themselves. Phenomenologists claim that if we want to understand experience, we have to go to the experience itself, as reflected in the Husserlian motto 'to the things themselves' (Husserl quoted in van Manen 1997: 31). The 'things' here do not mean objects or 'objective

entities' as in our common usage, but rather the 'intended entities' (Gadamer 1970/1976: 145), that is, anything that comes to our consciousness. It also means 'a turn toward their concrete referents in experience, i.e., to the uncensored phenomena' (Spiegelberg 1975: 58). The phrase 'experience itself' does not mean decontextualizing the phenomenon or studying the experience in isolation, but attending to the experience precisely as it is experienced. It is such concentration on the experience itself that leads to the discovery of the nature and meaning of experiences. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) gives a good example of what is meant by 'to the things themselves':

> To return to things themselves is to return to that world, which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is. (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962: ix, italics in original)

Another feature of phenomenological research is the suspension of prejudgements, assumptions, and theoretical understanding: what we call the 'natural attitude' (Husserl 1952/1989: 411). From the point of view of transcendental phenomenology, people experience unreflectively and take things for granted in daily life, preventing themselves from attending to the true nature of things. Therefore, 'phenomenology's first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself' (Moran 2000: 4). Transcendental phenomenology terms this reductive measure 'bracketing', or the setting aside of common-sense attitudes and personal preconceptions in inquiries into the course of experience (Moustakas 1994).

Existential and hermeneutic phenomenologists describe 'bracketing' as an attitude that 'slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962:

xiii). Instead of an 'abrupt cutting off' of relations, bracketing can be seen as 'gently loosening our usual connection with things' (Montgomery-Whicher 1997b: 49). Full bracketing can never be achieved, as Merleau-Ponty confirms: 'the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction' (1945/1962: xiv). Generally speaking, we may approach every phenomenon with new eyes: to see things as if we do not know them. Nevertheless, from the point of view of hermeneutic phenomenology, it would be self-deceptive, if not impossible, to suggest that we could free ourselves from all our biases, which are so engrained in our everyday thinking, and engage in a 'pure', suppositionless attitude in studying a phenomenon. After all, it is from such preconceptions and perspectives that we first come to know the phenomenon (Gadamer 1965/2004; Sharkey 2001). As phenomenological researchers, we should be aware of our context, knowledge and pre-understandings and make these explicit. By allowing the readers to know where we are and acknowledging our situatedness as researchers, we will be able to produce 'a clear picture' of what the study is all about (Barritt et al. 1983: 133).

Biswas claims that 'there is a natural affinity between our art experiences and the phenomenological technique' (1995: 32). For example, comparing phenomenological research to observation drawing, Montgomery-Whicher shows that both 'can be understood as analogous practices of inquiry, description and interpretation, and creation' (1997a: 216). What makes phenomenology particularly suitable to this study is its ability to articulate some of the essential qualities of what we normally call 'subjective' experiences. Phenomenological methods have been used to study experiences connected with aesthetics and art-making by Dufrenne (1953/1973), Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), Kaelin (1970), Montgomery-Whicher (1997b) and White (1998). Phenomenology has

also been used to study subjective experiences such as 'caring' (Riemen 1998), 'motor disability' (Bleeker 1992), 'thinking in chess' (Aanstoos 1985), and 'therapeutic listening' (Flickinger 1992). By presenting the subjective awareness of the phenomenon being studied in its most basic and unaltered form, phenomenological methods help to illuminate the nature of experience from the perspective of the experiencing person.

To understand how museum visitors experience paintings, I have looked for written descriptions of these experiences in the literature and obtained experiential accounts from non-art specialist museum visitors. During the process of collecting and analysing data, I have tried to be open-minded and non-judgemental. I am not able to describe every possible aspect of the experience as there are infinite instances of the experience, with each pointing to some aspects of the experience. I have provided some descriptions and interpretations of the experience that could bring changes to practices related to the experience of paintings for non-art specialist museum visitors. At the same time, I have to acknowledge that as an art educator, I am not naïve about the experience. My interest in and knowledge of paintings actually began when I was first introduced to art history and aesthetics in a systematic manner during studies in pre-service teacher training courses. When I became a secondary school teacher, I had more opportunities to travel and visit museums abroad. I was particularly moved by paintings which I came across in books on art history and museums. After joining the Hong Kong Institute of Education as a teacher-educator, I begin to think about pedagogical practices related to looking at and talking about paintings in schools and in other educational contexts such as museums. My personal experiences in museums have been largely enjoyable and meaningful experiences during which I have been fascinated by the formal qualities of paintings and the techniques used by artists. I began to think more seriously about the topic after

reading Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's (1990) *The Art of Seeing: An interpretation of the aesthetic encounter*, a book which provided me with many ideas, especially at the beginning of the study.

6.4 Issues of reliability and validity

Any discussion of methodology would be incomplete without touching on the issues of reliability and validity, issues which concern researchers whether they are engaged in quantitative or qualitative investigations. Reliability is the degree to which a study can generate similar results when replicated by another researcher with other subjects in another environment. Validity is the degree to which what a researcher claims to measure, explain, relate or describe resembles what he or she is measuring, explaining, relating or describing (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2000).

A high level of reliability, which is believed to be an indicator of good research design in the positivist paradigm, is based on the assumptions that situations can be re-created exactly, that researchers can be neutral, and that the objects/subjects of study are static and stable. To achieve reliability, situations must be completely replicable; the unique event thus presents a problem. Phenomenologists respond by stating:

> We believe that things are no less important simply because they happen once. ... We acknowledge that some visions of the truth are not verifiable through repetition, although many experiences can be checked; often a description is so convincing that the reader doesn't doubt its accuracy. At other times, where doubt does exist, little can be done to certify accuracy beyond assuming the integrity of the investigator or reviewing any written reports upon which the analysis was based. (Barritt et al. 1983: 125-126)

Is it in fact possible to reproduce exactly any study of human science? Even if the same researcher uses the same method to study the same phenomenon, the study will not be the same. In order to pursue reliability, it seems that researchers should try to be 'transparent' or disinterested. However, eliminating the researcher means eliminating the central figure in the research. Barritt et al. say 'it is hard to redo any kind of study when humans are involved because conditions are never entirely replicable' (1983: 124); I would say that it is not hard, but impossible. We are bounded by our context and our history.

Most phenomenological studies are based on participants' recollections of their everyday experiences in the past. Those concerned with the validity of participants' descriptions may ask, 'How do you know that the participant is telling the truth?' This is a question that confronts every researcher whose project involves interviewing individuals. In this respect, phenomenological studies in which participants are asked to relate experiences are in a stronger position than other kinds of studies in which participants are asked to explain, comment, judge or predict. Participants in phenomenological studies are not under any obligation or pressure to profess their attitude towards certain issues and they are, comparatively speaking, in a more comfortable position to talk about their memories. The retrospective nature of the participants' reflections on their experiences with paintings in a museum in the present study, together with the intersubjective agreement that phenomenologists look for among experiences, helps to establish the validity of the results obtained.

Concerning the validity of participants' descriptions of experience, one may also enquire, 'if phenomenology is intended to study experience as it presents itself, then why don't phenomenologists just observe participants?' First, not all experience is observable.

Many significant experiences are internal, with few visible signs, as in the case of the present study: two persons looking at the same painting in the same museum may have very different experiences, but the differences in their experiences may not be observable. Second, and more importantly, it is always after the experience that we are capable of recalling what has happened with some degree of clarity. Van Manen observes that 'it is not possible to experience something *while* reflecting on the experience' (1997: 182). Barritt et al. (1983) note that the approach of using recollected experience is an aid to phenomenological study because it completes, rather than distorts, our understanding of an experience. They also point out that recollected experiences are,

> a legitimate, and sometimes the only source of information about important events. We believe that these recollections should be used with the acknowledgement that they are not exactly the same as the original experience but that they nevertheless speak significantly about that experience. (Barritt et al. 1983: 141)

Does this mean that there is no way to check the validity of a phenomenological study? Phenomenologists look for intersubjective agreement among participants as a verification of descriptions of experience. From a phenomenological perspective, experience is unique, but not totally private. During the course of social interaction, through continual alteration and readjustment, we build up a 'shared reality' (Smith 1991) that belongs to all.

Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997) suggest that we look for two kinds of evidence that may contribute to the validity of a phenomenological study. The first is methodological evidence: i.e., the rigour and the appropriateness of the procedures used to collect and analyse data. The second is experiential evidence: i.e., the capability of the results to produce insights among readers. For methodological evidence, we have to examine the research process and procedures. For experiential evidence, we have to examine the

readers' agreement with the findings presented. According to Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997), a phenomenological study is valid only when substantial evidence can be found both methodologically and experientially:

> Well-executed qualitative procedures that do not generate meaningful results are technique without soul. Brilliant interpretation may have value, but one needs to be convinced of the evidence serving to ground such findings in lived experience. Only when both criteria are met does phenomenological description attain the rigor and insight that it aspires to attain and that are likely to convince empirical researchers of its significance. (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 55-56)

Phenomenology, particularly hermeneutic phenomenology, does not attempt to provide an absolute representation of an experience. Instead, a hermeneutic phenomenological study will provide a number of possible interpretations of the experience, none of which is absolute nor superior to any of the others (Barritt et al. 1983; Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997). There are always alternative interpretations of the same description of an experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology also acknowledges the need for renewing an interpretation when new instances of the phenomenon appear. 'It would be a poor hermeneuticist who thought he could have, or had to have, the last word' (Gadamer 1965/2004: 581). In this way, there will be no complete closure to a hermeneutic phenomenological study. Therefore, the validity of a hermeneutic phenomenological study depends not on an absolute and ultimate representation of a phenomenon, but on 'whether a reader, adopting the world view articulated by the researcher, would be able to see textual evidence supporting the interpretation, and whether the goal of providing a first-person understanding was attained' (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 53). It is important to evaluate a phenomenological study with an epistemology common to the researcher and the reader. The agreement of a reader has been called 'the phenomenological nod' (van Manen 1997: 27). 'Nod of heads and faint smiles' (Jardine 1992: 58) are signs showing that readers recognize what the researcher recognizes, share

what the researcher describes, agree with what the researcher suggests, understand what the researcher means, and sometimes see what readers have not seen before.

Perhaps 'trustworthiness' and 'authenticity' (Creswell 1998: 77), therefore, are better terms to use than 'reliability' and 'validity' when attempting to gauge the credibility of this study.

6.5 Conclusion

Spiegelberg (1975) summarizes the significance of conducting a phenomenological study in the following paragraph:

> I suggested that phenomenology in its descriptive stage can stimulate our perceptiveness for the richness of our experience in breadth and in depth; that in its search for essences it can develop imaginativeness and the sense for both what is essential and what is accidental; that, in its attention to ways of appearance, it can heighten the sense for the inexhaustibility of the perspectives through which our world is given; that, in its study of their constitution in consciousness it can develop the sense for the dynamic adventure in our relationship with the world; that by the suspending of existential judgment it can make us more aware of the precariousness of all our trans-subjective claims to knowledge, a ground for epistemological humility; and that in its hermeneutic phase it can keep us open for concealed meaning in the phenomena. (Spiegelberg 1975: 70)

Spiegelberg focuses on the contribution of phenomenology to human existence, or what he calls the 'human uses' of the phenomenological approach, showing the differences in one's own living that the practice of phenomenology might make. On the basis of such a framework, I will outline the significance of the methodology in understanding museum visitors' experience of paintings.

I believe that the term 'aesthetic experience' has been overloaded with connotations that obscure, rather than reveal the phenomenon. The descriptive approach of phenomenology brings us back to the basic 'appearance' of people's experience of paintings in a museum. Descriptions, if done well, have a richness and immediacy that could articulate the experience of paintings in a genuine and undistorted form. The eidetic attempt of phenomenology is to grasp the essential structures of a phenomenon. By working back and forth between what is unique and what is shared, the present study attempts to search for the basic structure of the experience, offering some possible themes of the experience. The search for what is 'essential and necessary' will also tell us about what is 'accidental and contingent' (Spiegelberg 1975: 64). By focusing on the 'appearances' of the phenomenon, phenomenology attempts to reveal the many sides of a phenomenon. The attention that phenomenology pays to the relations among people, objects and the world will help to bring about a multidimensional understanding of museum visitors' experience of paintings. When concluding this study, I have attempted to be open-minded, and respectful of the truth of the experience. Such an attitude in studying museum visitors' experience of paintings helps to question and clarify the taken-for-granted meanings of the experience. Through a thematic analysis of the phenomenon which aims to be both reflective and rigorous, I have attempted to shed light on some hidden areas of the experience of paintings for non-art specialist museum visitors.

I would like to end the discussion with a summary of some of my experiences with phenomenology. Phenomenology is something that we cannot know about until we practise it. It is a belief as well as a practice. Phenomenology is a *re-search* process, which means we have to search and re-search the phenomenon we are studying, as well as

the text we are producing. Phenomenology is also a *re-examining* process. It depends on our confidence, creativity, and sometimes on our courage to re-examine and see things *not* as they are. Phenomenology is a *renewing* process. It stimulates once again our enthusiasm for life, our curiosity about people, about knowledge, and about the world. Things become new and interesting when looked at from a phenomenological perspective. Phenomenology is *not* a *restricting* process. It is a process that constantly evolves. Fear of uncertainty is an aspect of human nature. When conducting research, we usually want clear-cut procedures and unambiguous results. However, phenomenology does tolerate a degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty here does not mean a loss of direction, but rather the allowance of possibility. In practising phenomenology, patience, tolerance of ambiguity, reflectivity, and a sense of exploration are required (van Manen 1997). In this sense, practising phenomenology is not unlike creating a work of art (Montgomery-Whicher 1997a; van Manen 1997; Willis 1991).

Chapter Seven: Research Methods and Procedures

7.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the procedures of collecting, analysing and interpreting, and presenting the data in this study. One important procedure in data collection – the phenomenological interview – is discussed in depth. Some specifics of the research process are also presented with a discussion of their implications. A section has been included to explain the different stages of data collection and how the first and second interview formats were established. The procedures as outlined in this chapter were refined on the basis of reflections made after the completion of the pilot study. Issues regarding the research question, scope of the study, number of participants, procedures of collecting data, and the number and nature of the interviews were also revised accordingly. Brief descriptions of each of the participants are also included to give the reader a better understanding of the individuals who provided accounts of their experiences for the main study. The process of data interpretation is then explained and illustrated with an example. The chapter ends with a discussion of the importance of the writing of the research text.

7.2 Data Collection

In order to obtain accounts of people's lived experience of paintings, I looked for

individuals who had had such an experience. Although I do not belong to the category of non-art specialists, my own experiences, as well as first-person accounts of museum visitors' experience of paintings found in published texts, were used to initiate the study. As noted by Maykut and Morehouse, the phenomenological approach involves 'a close examination of people's words, actions, and documents in order to discern patterns of meaning which come out of this data' (1994: 16). Van Manen also suggests looking for documentation of lived experience from 'a multitude of expressions or forms' (1997: 92). Therefore, this study also collected, used and analysed experiential accounts drawn from poems, novels, diaries, and research related to the experience being studied.

A major part of the data collection focused on the experiences of eight adult non-art specialists (referred to as participants hereafter) who visit museums on a regular basis, ranging from twice a year to once a month. I invited them to participate because they 1) had numerous experiences of paintings in a museum; 2) were able to talk and provide detailed descriptions of their experiences; 3) were willing to participate in the research and be involved in lengthy interviews; and 4) were interested in understanding the nature and meaning of their experiences.

Potential participants were approached and asked for their permission and also about their availability for the research. They were briefed about the background of the research and the nature of their involvement. They understood that they would be interviewed once or twice and that each interview would last from one to two hours. They also knew that the interview would be audio-recorded, transcribed and the data collected would be used in my PhD research. Each participant signed a consent form (appendix 3), stating that their participation was voluntary, that they might choose to withdraw from the study at any

time, and that they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

Before embarking on a detailed discussion of phenomenological interviews, it will be useful to describe briefly the evolution of the data collection procedures.

7.2.1 The pilot interviews

For non-art specialists, I looked to one of my students, Mandy, as the first participant. She satisfied both the criteria: an adult non-art specialist and a regular museum visitor. During the pilot stage, I interviewed her three times. The first interview took place before she visited the Hong Kong Museum of Art, focusing on her previous experiences of paintings in a museum. After the visit, I interviewed her twice and we talked about her experience in the museum. I also based the second interview on a piece of reflective writing she produced about the museum visit. The third interview was relatively short, for the most part a discussion of themes that I had identified.

After this first series of interviews, I decided to extend the pilot study to a group of my students. It was a relatively small group, consisting of seven students enrolled in the first year of a secondary school teacher education course. They are about twenty years old and are educated in art up to junior secondary school level (that is, around age fifteen). They were interviewed twice. Following closely the structure and content of the interviews conducted for the pilot study, the first interview was a recounting of their previous experiences in museums while the second interview focused on their visit to the Hong Kong Museum of Art. They were asked to write an account of the experience in the museum after the visit. Based on the students' reflective accounts, the second interview

took place about two weeks after the visit. There was one difference between this and the first series of pilot interviews: we went to the museum together as a class visit. In addition to the museum account, students were encouraged to keep reflective journals recording any related experiences for about ten weeks until the end of term. After I finished transcribing all their interviews, I found that, with the exception of Yoko and Ken, the data obtained from these students' accounts of their experiences were not as rich as I had expected. In view of the fact that the purpose of the study is to understand museum visitors' experience of paintings, I saw no reason to limit the study to my own students. I therefore set out to look for other people who satisfied the participant criteria and began the third round of interviews. The process remained the same throughout the study: participants were interviewed twice, focusing on their previous as well as on their more recent experiences of paintings in a museum.

The data collection methods of research into art museum visitors' experience fall into three main categories. The first method is to ask participants to write autobiographical descriptions of their experiences of works in art museums (e.g., Clarkson and Worts 2005; Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson 2002; Linko 2003). Researchers may also use their own autobiography as a way of reflecting on their encounters with artworks in museums (e.g., Sheen 2001; Stylianides 2003). The second method is to accompany participants on a museum visit and ask them to talk about their experience while they are walking around (e.g., Émond 2005; Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2001; Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2001). A variation of the second method is to accompany participants to museums and interview them immediately after their visit to the exhibitions (e.g., Montgomery-Whicher 1987; Soren 2000; Weltzl-Fairchild, Dufresne-Tassé and Dube 1997). The third method is to ask participants to reflect on their previous experiences in art museums (e.g., Fyfe and

Ross 1996; Montgomery-Whicher 1987). Considering the above-mentioned procedures and the pilot cases, I decided to use the data collection procedures which are outlined in the following paragraphs.

7.2.2 The first interviews

The first interviews with the participants in the main study took place in a variety of locations but were usually conducted in cafés or restaurants close to the participants' offices or places of study. The criteria used to select the venue for each interview were convenience to the participant and quietness so as to facilitate talking, reflecting, and audio-recording. As I did not know most of the participants well before the interviews, I usually started by offering a brief explanation of the study and asking them to talk about their families and educational backgrounds. Participants also talked about the museums which they usually visited and their interest in paintings and museums. The first part of the interview was a conversation to gain an understanding of the participant and to establish mutual trust and confidence. After the first conversation, participants soon got used to being audio-recorded. During these interviews, participants were invited to:

1. reflect on their previous experiences with paintings in any context;
2. share instances that stood out from these experiences, in particular those in a museum setting; and
3. talk about how these experiences were related to themselves personally.

In general, the first interview took longer than the second interview, as some of the time was devoted to the introduction of the participants themselves. Participants also had plenty of previous experiences of paintings to share. The first interview usually lasted for

an hour and a half to two hours. Usually the interviews came to an end when the participants said that they had no more experiences to share. In general, the experiences described in the first interviews were 'memorable' experiences of paintings in a museum. The participants talked mainly about experiences in international museums visited when they had travelled abroad. Both 'good' and 'bad' experiences were mentioned. Sometimes, participants could not remember details about the paintings they had seen. For example, they had forgotten the title of the painting or even the subject matter, but they remembered certain qualities of the painting, such as its use of colours, or particular aspects of the experience, such as the feeling of being inside the painting. As participants recalled their past experiences, they portrayed these in a more condensed and focused manner than in the second interviews.

7.2.3 The second interviews

A visit to the Hong Kong Museum of Art or other art museum was then scheduled after the first interview and interviews took place immediately after the visit. With the two interviews conducted in London, the second interview took place after the participants had visited the National Portrait Gallery. The time between the first and second interviews was two weeks to a month. This was dependent on the availability of the participants as well as on my having developed themes generated from the first interview. Before we sat down for the second interview, participants were encouraged to walk around the museum on their own. They knew that they would be talking about some of the paintings they had seen in the museum. As is typical of phenomenological research, the interviews followed the flow of the conversation, rather than being organized around specific pre-determined questions, but participants were asked to share:

1. the painting(s) that they chose to talk about;
2. the ways in which the painting interested them;
3. the feelings, thoughts or emotions generated by the painting; and
4. the meaning of the experience to them.

During the second interview, I also discussed with participants some of the themes that had emerged from the first interview. Sometimes I asked them to elaborate on specific issues and sometimes I sought clarification of certain themes. During the first interview, some participants had mentioned an experience that had happened a long time ago, and had forgotten exactly what the painting looked like. Therefore, when I saw them for the second time, I brought along reproductions in books or images downloaded from websites and showed them the paintings that they had mentioned. They looked at the paintings again and sometimes they talked more about the experience. The second interview usually lasted for an hour.

In the second interviews, participants talked about their experiences of paintings in a more fluid and spontaneous way. Besides having a better knowledge of me and the research, the participants knew what the interview would be like and anticipated what they were going to talk about. They were able to describe the paintings in more detail. During the second interview, themes or topics which had emerged from the first interview appeared again, but were now embellished with examples and references to the paintings.

7.2.4 The phenomenological interview

Engaging participants in conversational interviews is 'an almost inevitable procedure for

attaining a rigorous and significant description of the world of everyday human experience as it is lived and described by specific individuals in specific circumstances' (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 28). Phenomenological interviews emphasize the dialogue between the researcher and the participant, during which the interviewee describes and clarifies his or her experience with the interviewer (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997: 29). The dialogic nature of the phenomenological interview places the researcher and the participant in a more equal position, co-working to reconstruct the experience. The interviews for this study were used 'as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon' and as 'a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience' (van Manen 1997: 66). Becker (1992) summarizes the paradoxical role of the researcher during a phenomenological interview:

> The research interview is paradoxical in a number of ways. It is a task-focused situation whose outcome depends upon the quality of the researcher-researchee's relationship. Also, it is structured, yet unstructured. The researcher is prepared and knowledgeable yet open-minded and naïve, immersed in the data but standing back to get an overview of it, and receptively responsive but task oriented. The researcher must be resourcefully responsive without leading, join the other person's lifeworld without intruding, be personably goal oriented, and be flexibly focused. (Becker 1992: 41)

After obtaining an initial understanding of the participants' personal backgrounds, I usually began by asking about their experiences of paintings in a museum with questions like the following:

> *You said that you like to go to exhibitions and visit museums. Can you think of an experience of a painting, I mean looking at paintings in a museum, that you want to share with me? You may talk about what actually comes to your mind. What do you think? How do you feel? ... You may recreate the experience in detail.*

The phenomenological interview is not a restricted, rule-governed procedure in which the

researcher, presumably assuming a neutral role and a dispassionate attitude, delivers structured questions with the aim of obtaining an objective account from the subject. The phenomenological interview is an interpersonal interaction in which each of the participants works together with the researcher to allow experience to emerge freely from a respectful dialogue. Participants are there not to explain, theorize, justify or evaluate, but to *describe* their specific experience as it occurred. For example, at the beginning of the interview with Irene, she talked about her experience in a very general manner, so I asked her to elaborate with particular instances:

Irene: *Impressionist paintings to me, in a way, are very philosophical. I think if I go back to the concept about self or about ... for example, itself or ourselves, whether we have a continuous self or the perception of self ...*

Thomas: *But do you remember one particular experience of a particular painting?*

Irene: *In this case?*

Thomas: *Yes.*

Irene: *All the Impressionist paintings give me the same message. Yes, they share the same ... so that is why I remember all those paintings ...*

Thomas: *Perhaps you can talk about a particular instance.*

Irene: *I am talking about these experiences in general and then I can relate to more specific ones. I think that is why I appreciate Impressionist paintings. Now I can share with you a particular one like this. I feel ... again in the Courtauld Gallery ...*

According to Pollio, Henley and Thompson (1997), the trustworthiness of data obtained from a phenomenological interview rests on two beliefs. The first belief is that a person's experiential field is organized rather than chaotic. Although the meanings of experience may change with context, there is a certain stability underlying the structure of the experience. The second belief is the present-centred nature of remembering. We only remember the past in the present, and any past experience will be remembered in relation to and accommodating the present perspective. While one's past is being contextualized

by the present, the present perspective is also framed by one's past history. Therefore, descriptions of the past experience will take present situations into account while at the same time carrying contextualized meaning from one's past. For example, on a few occasions during the interview with Mandy, she made sense of the painting in terms of her family's experience. Referring to *They're Growing up* – a painting by a Hong Kong artist called Deng Ningzi, she recalled that,

> *my family had to earn supplementary income by getting some part-time work at home. I had to help so as to get some money to buy dolls and sweets. It is not at all easy to make money. ... I think children nowadays don't know the difficulties of making a living. They don't value what they've got now. When we were young, we had to work for toys and food. ...*

The interview process focused mainly on the participants' experiences of paintings and museums they had visited. However, on some occasions, participants would talk about things which were not directly related to their experiences of paintings, such as the behaviour of other people in the museum, their friends' views of a certain painting or their difficulties in finding the way to the museum. Usually, I would keep listening, as long as what they mentioned helped me better understand or contextualize their experiences in the museum. For example, Linda described in detail her experience of visiting the Getty Museum, followed by her experience of Monet's paintings:

> *It is a sightseeing trip to LA. A group of really interesting friends go together. Wendy is with us too. Let me see... altogether six people. We drive to the Getty Museum. We park the car somewhere nearby and get into a tram that takes us to the museum. The environment is good, as there is a limit to the number of visitors being admitted into the museum. If the quota is full, people aren't allowed to go in. So you won't feel crowded inside the museum. The design of the museum is special. The outer wall is built of some light-coloured stone. The weather is good. The blue sky goes well with the white wall. The museum is beautiful. We all walk around in a leisurely manner. ... We don't intend to get to every corner of the museum. We walk and look. We occasionally sit down and have a drink. ... When I walk into one gallery room, I see the painting.*

For most of the time, the interviews remained focused and oriented, staying close to the purpose of obtaining first-person accounts of the participants' experience. I did not provide any prompts or questions with an intention to direct participants. My role there was to listen, occasionally seek for elaboration and clarification, and to ask for specific and concrete examples and details of the experience. The following is an example of how I sought clarification and examples of what Irene meant by saying that paintings 'talk' to her:

Irene: *At that time I looked at the Impressionist paintings as usual in the Courtauld Gallery. I still feel that they are ... very nice. While I walk through them ... yes, these paintings talk to me but I don't feel relieved. And then, however, when I walk through all those paintings and to the end, it is a painting by Kandinsky ...*

Thomas: *You mention that paintings talk to you ...*

Irene: *Yes.*

Thomas: *Can you elaborate a bit more on how paintings talk to you?*

Irene: *Paintings talk to me. Yes. [pause] It is ... Paintings talk to me. [long pause] For example, take the Kandinsky painting as an example. That painting is like a demonstration for me ... it talks to me. It not only talks to me, it demonstrates how ... somehow at that moment ... how I can let go of all of the things that have got stuck in me.*

It was time to end the interview when long silences occurred on both sides, when I had no more questions to ask and when the participants ran out of new things to add and began to repeat themselves (Becker 1992). Here is an example of how I ended an interview:

Thomas: *A humanly quietness ...*

Connie: *Yes, you're right ... though no human is being depicted.*

Thomas: *A humanly quietness. [pause] It seems that you are interviewing me. [both laugh]*

Connie: *Yes, we are communicating.*

Thomas: *Fine. Do you have anything to add?*

Connie: *No, nothing in particular. I hope the interview will be helpful.*

Thomas: *Yes, I'm sure it will. Thank you.*

7.3 The participants

Describing the backgrounds of the participants in detail will place readers in a better position to understand the source of the data and how they were obtained. All participants satisfied the criteria stated in section 7.2 and were interviewed separately. Their educational backgrounds ranged from secondary education to PhD studies. They had studied art/art and craft/art and design at primary school. Most of them had studied art until junior secondary school (age fifteen). The participants' past and current occupations had no direct relation to art or art-related disciplines. Their family backgrounds did not seem to make any significant impact on their interest in paintings and museums. They are regular museum-goers and they like to talk about their experiences of paintings in museums. One of the participants is my personal friend but I came to know most of the participants through other people. Some of them were introduced to me through the docent service of the Hong Kong Museum of Art. One of them is a course mate whom I came to know during my PhD study. Others were my first-year students enrolled at the Hong Kong Institute of Education as pre-service art teachers. Although more than twenty people were interviewed, I selected only eight to be included in the study. These were people who were able to give richer descriptions, were more willing to talk and to be engaged in second interviews. Brief descriptions of each participant are provided in the following section.

Connie[1]

Connie is a volunteer museum docent and a housewife in her early forties. I came to

[1] Participants in the study have been given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

know her through the docent service of the Hong Kong Museum of Art[2]. Like most of the participants, Connie has had an interest in art since she was young. Connie has an education up to tertiary level, most of which was gained on a part-time basis. She had to work hard to pay for her education, which is typical of the struggles of Hong Kong people during the 1960s and 1970s. In that era, it was unusual for a girl to go to university. During the interview, Connie was eager to talk about her experience. She felt free to express herself. She was the one who mainly talked about reproductions and original paintings. Although I met Connie only twice, I had a feeling that we had known each other for a long time.

Linda

Linda is a friend of my friend, Wendy. When Wendy found out that I needed to meet people who were interested in looking at paintings, she introduced Linda to me. Linda is a woman in her thirties with a master's level education. She had worked in the field of Human Resource Management and as a researcher for a news magazine before joining a local university as a librarian – her current occupation. She likes the arts and literature, especially the performing arts. Linda's interest in the visual arts began when she was engaged in further studies in the United States and travelled to Europe where she had numerous opportunities to visit museums. Linda has a special interest in Chinese literature, which was developed during her secondary schooling. During the interviews, Linda's manner of speaking was sharp and crisp. She understood exactly what I needed to know and she talked in an organized manner.

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[2] The docent service of the Hong Kong Museum of Art had given me four names and I interviewed three of them, since the last one was unavailable. Only Connie's experiences were selected to be included in the study.

Irene

Irene is a PhD student at the Institute of Education whom I came to know during my stay in London. She is in her thirties. Irene is a friendly person and she places a high value on her relationships with friends. She comes from Taiwan and is studying the correlation between research output and teaching effectiveness in universities, especially at doctoral level. Before that, she studied Mathematics and Sociology in Taipei and Nottingham respectively. Irene is an analytical person. She likes to think a lot. Although she is unfamiliar with the practice of art-making, she has a passion for paintings and she has visited many museums during her time studying in London. She also has some artist friends whom she visits regularly. In a way, Irene is a sentimental person. She was almost in tears twice during her first interview. She is an articulate person and she is able to describe her experiences in detail.

Joe

Joe is another student whom I met in London. He is in his late twenties. He is energetic and has an interest in almost everything, particularly in those things which he thinks can help him to make a good living. He is working towards a Master's degree in Psychology and Education at the University of London. He studied Business Administration and History Education before leaving Hong Kong for further study in the UK. Joe was born in China. His family moved to Hong Kong when he was a child. He is a hard-working and ambitious person, eager to have a successful career. He has an interest in drawing and painting but he gave them up early for other subjects which are deemed more practical and can provide him with a living. Joe has a particular interest in history and he visits museums as a leisure activity. During the interviews, Joe talked a lot about himself. He showed himself to be a confident and observant person.

Fred

I have known Fred for a long time, as we went to the same secondary school. Once, we were quite good friends, but since we finished secondary school, we have seldom seen each other. Fred is a sensitive person. He likes art and he can draw quite well, especially cartoon figures. However, he only studied art up to junior secondary level (age fifteen). Before joining a primary school as a Chinese teacher, he studied Journalism and Chinese. His name came to my mind when I was searching for suitable candidates for my study. It was a good chance for us to talk again and visit museums together. Fred is not a big museum fan, but he does visit museums on a regular basis: in particular, blockbuster exhibitions. During the interviews, Fred did not recall much about his previous experiences of paintings in a museum, but he talked a great deal about the paintings that we had just seen at the museum.

Mandy

Mandy was one of my students enrolled on the Two-year Certificate of Education[3] course. This is a course designed to train primary school teachers who do not have a university degree. Mandy was around twenty years old at the time. During the time of the interviews, she was a first-year student who had been admitted onto the course for no more than a month. Mandy has a talent in art-making and she studied art to Form Five level (age seventeen). She is a quiet and hard-working person. She is more mature than most of her classmates and sometimes she assumes a leading role in the class. During her secondary school life, she often visited museums out of interest as well as for her studies. During the interviews, Mandy appeared to be a reflective person. She spoke intelligently

[3] Certificate of Education Courses are offered for secondary school graduates. On completion of the course, participants will be awarded a certificate as primary or secondary school teachers.

about her experience and she was able to give clear descriptions.

Yoko'

Yoko was enrolled on the Three-year Certificate of Education course for training secondary school teachers who do not hold a university degree. Like Mandy, Yoko was a first-year student around twenty years old. Yoko studied art up to junior secondary level (age fifteen). She is quite a creative person and she likes to make small craft works. Yoko is well-liked by her classmates. She often has crazy ideas and she sometimes plays jokes on others. At times, she can be sentimental. Although her parents do not work in areas related to art or paintings, Yoko visits museums mainly with her family. During the interview, she was expressive and excited to talk about her experiences of paintings. She can be imaginative and is able to relate her experiences to many different things.

Ken

Ken was a student on the Three-year Certificate of Education course for training secondary school teachers and one of Yoko's classmates. He is the only male in his class. His family is not particularly well-off and he has to do part-time jobs to support his living and studies. This is quite common among students taking our courses. Ken is keen on studio art. He likes going to contemporary art exhibitions and looks for inspiration for assignments. He knows little about art history or art theories and he is more interested in artists and their techniques. Although he studied art only up to junior secondary level (age fifteen), his skills in art-making are good. Besides attending module lectures, he enjoys working alone in the studio. He has an interest in mechanics and art. During the interviews, Ken asked questions to clarify what I meant and he expressed his views succinctly.

The profile of the participants shows that they are quite a select yet random group[4]. The participants' level of education is also comparatively high and they are predominately students at various levels of post-secondary education. Ethnically, all participants are Chinese. During the formulation of the study, I had no hypothesis regarding age, sex or education. The aim of the present study is to understand people's lived experience of paintings in a museum as a human experience. Since this is a phenomenological study, no attempt has been made to collect experiences from a stratified or representative sample. The participants' educational background, socio-economic status, sex, ethnicity and personality are not the foci of the study. Rather, I have endeavoured to find people who have experiences of paintings and are regular museum-goers but who do not have specialist art training. Perhaps the background of the participants also reflects the fact that these individuals are actually typical of the people who visit museums regularly[5].

7.4 The specifics of the study

The present study aims to articulate the lived meanings of museum visitors' experience of paintings. The participants were asked to reflect on experiences they had had before their involvement in the study. After the participants had agreed to be interviewed, they were asked to choose and describe an experience of a painting (or paintings) in a museum. In order to collect accounts of experience of paintings in a 'natural' situation, the

[4] A table summarizing the details of the participants can be found in Appendix 4.

[5] Quoting recent studies conducted in Britain and the United States, both Rice (2003) and Prior (2003) note that museum visitors are largely middle-class with higher incomes and education. Rice (2003) also points out that there are rather more women than men visiting museums.

participants were invited to visit a museum and to share their experiences immediately after the visit. This gave me the opportunity to interview the participants about their more recent experiences.

The specifics of the present study make it meaningful in a number of ways. The museum is one of the main environments in which we come into contact with paintings. It is not uncommon to hear people saying that they acquired their first love of paintings when they were taken to a museum with classmates or with the family. There are many reasons why people visit a museum to look at paintings. An afternoon in a museum may be a routine in the monthly plan of a retired couple. One tired tourist may drop into a museum fifteen minutes before closing time after a day's shopping while for another tourist the art museums may be the most significant attractions in any city. University students may go to the museum to collect data for their final-year projects. People go to museums to see paintings under many different circumstances. The participants in this study visited the museum with an intention: namely, to be interviewed and to talk about their experience of paintings. There are many cases in which we go to an exhibition with an agenda in mind, but that does not prevent us from having a meaningful experience. The short time span between the experience and the interview renders the memory more vivid, and more details can be recalled. Although participants may spend more time than is usual in thinking about the paintings, it is an effective and 'natural' way to collect data on a subjective experience.

I should also point out that these participants are a group of persons with specific attributes. They are people who visit museums regularly. To a certain degree, they are more knowledgeable and experienced than people who never go to museums. They also

have higher expectations of paintings than people who do not visit museums. The participants' educational backgrounds in art vary: most of them have studied art to junior secondary level (age fifteen), one had art lessons until form five (age seventeen), while no one has studied art up to form seven level (age nineteen). Moreover, the fact that they have studied art at school does not necessarily mean that they are knowledgeable about paintings or art theories. Even though they may have some knowledge of art history, it tends to be sketchy. The participants are generally more interested in art-making, which is the focus of most primary and secondary art education in Hong Kong.

Participants visited the Hong Kong Museum of Art, including the Contemporary Hong Kong Art Gallery and the Chinese Painting Gallery. To be more specific, the second interviews with three of the participants took place after a visit to the retrospective exhibition of works by Wu Guanzhong held at the Hong Kong Museum of Art[6]. The Contemporary Hong Kong Art Gallery houses a permanent collection of works by artists who have been based in Hong Kong since the 1960s. Works shown in the gallery include paintings using Western and Chinese media, sculpture in a variety of media, ceramics, drawings, prints, and photographs. Being a remote part of China and under British governance for more than a hundred and fifty years, Hong Kong tends to exhibit evidence of cultural domination and assimilation, rather than of confrontation or total integration. The works of Hong Kong artists are heavily influenced by Western aesthetics, but at the same time many of them bear identifiable traces of the impact of Oriental philosophy (Hong Kong Museum of Art 1997).

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[6] Wu Guanzhong is an important figure in contemporary Chinese art. He tries to combine Western-style formal beauty with Eastern spirituality in his works. He works in oils and ink-and-wash. He has held solo exhibitions at national museums in Beijing, Taiwan, Singapore, Paris and London (Wu 2002). The participants were free to choose any paintings in the museum that they were interested in talking about.

7.5 Data interpretation

Data generated from phenomenological interviews are descriptive and empirical in nature, composed of authentic descriptions, portraits or 'stories' told from the point of view of real lives, but not of theories, conceptualizations or explanations. The data are empirical in the sense that they are based on experiences that people lived through personally and are obtained by following systematic procedures. I conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed all the interviews on my own. As the interviews were conducted in Chinese (except for the one with Irene), the transcribing of the interviews involved not only transcription, but also translation. Once the interviews had been transcribed, I discussed them in Chinese with the participants during the second interviews so as to make sure that the accounts were accurate reflections or descriptions of what they meant. If discrepancies were found, revisions and amendments were made to the account.

The analysis of data follows specific phenomenological procedures as described by van Manen (1997). The process of data analysis started with one interview account at a time. The account was read and re-read as a whole in order to identify key notions or significant statements that stood out (van Manen 1997). The following is an extract from the first interview account given by Connie in which she is talking about paintings by Van Gogh.

Connie: *I only know his name. Maybe I have seen one or two of his paintings before. But I don't know much about him. I know some facts about his life. For example, he was mentally ill and he once tried to cut his own ear off. But I don't know who Gauguin is. I can just recall some of these names. ... When I saw reproductions of Van Gogh's paintings in books, it seemed to me that they were ordinary works and there was nothing special about them. I just saw some exaggerated lines. But when I saw the original painting in the museum, I shook.*

Thomas: *What do you mean, you 'shook'?*

Connie: *I had a feeling. I discovered that the painting had a feeling of life.*

Thomas: *Life?*

Connie: *Yes, the painting made me feel like this. I remember that the painting was yellow in colour. But I've forgotten which painting it was.*

Thomas: *You've forgotten what was painted in the painting.*

Connie: *I've forgotten the subject matter of the painting, but the lines and the colour made me feel like ... it should be what I have just said, 'it had a life of its own'.*

Thomas: *I would like to know more ... when you say that the painting 'had a life of its own', what do you mean exactly?*

Connie: *It's got energy ... it means that you no longer see the painting as a flat surface or a dead object. You know the painting isn't a three-dimensional object in reality. The painting is about ... I cannot remember what the painting depicts exactly. I just remember the yellow colour.*

Thomas: *You mean you've forgotten what is depicted in the painting, but you still remember the painting.*

Connie: *Yes. Um ... maybe when I see his paintings again, I'll be able to tell which painting is the one I'm talking about. ... There are several Van Gogh's paintings in the museum. ... It gives me a feeling ... compared to my experience of seeing prints in my daily life, I don't feel the same way. But when I see the original painting, I can really feel it. Even to a layperson like me, Van Gogh's paintings show his passion and I can feel it. The emotions of the artist draw me into a state of resonance. Even if it's a clump of grass, you can feel that the grass is alive.*

Thomas: *You have just mentioned 'resonance'. What do you mean?*

Connie: *Actually, I'm not sure what it really refers to. In my own experience, I feel ... the problem is that perhaps the artist doesn't feel the same way I feel. The original intention of the artist may not be the same as what I have in mind. I think ... let me think ... I think resonance means ... [laugh] it's very difficult to make it clear. Anyway, it's like ... perhaps we use the term very often, but indeed we ...*

After reading Connie's account a few times so as to bring out a sense of the whole, I searched for notions that appeared again and again and for notions that I assumed were important. It was not a matter of counting frequencies, but a matter of intuiting meanings

and finding order. Therefore, even a notion that appeared only once has been included if I considered it significant. Following the 'selecting and highlighting approach' suggested by van Manen (1997: 93), I considered statement(s) or phrase(s) which seemed particularly revealing about the experience. I sorted out a number of key phrases that captured my attention in their original order of appearance:

1. *when I saw reproductions of Van Gogh's paintings in books, it seemed to me that they were ordinary works and there was nothing special about them.*
2. *But when I saw the original painting in the museum, I shook.*
3. *I discovered that the painting had a feeling of life.*
4. *I remember that the painting was yellow in colour. But I've forgotten which painting it was.*
5. *the lines and the colour made me feel like ... it should be what I have just said, 'it had a life of its own'.*
6. *I've forgotten the subject matter of the painting but the lines and the colour made me feel like ...*
7. *it means that you no longer see the painting as a flat surface or a dead object.*
8. *compared to my experience of seeing prints in my daily life, I don't feel the same way.*
9. *But when I see the original painting, I can really feel it.*
10. *Van Gogh's paintings show his passion and I can feel it.*
11. *The emotions of the artist draw me into a state of resonance.*
12. *Indeed, I'm not sure what it [resonance] really refers to.*
13. *The original intention of the artist may not be the same as what I have in mind.*
14. *I think resonance means ... [laugh] it's very difficult to make it clear. Anyway, it's like ...*

A reading into these phrases showed that some of them were related to each other. For example, phrases 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 were about the differences between experiencing original paintings and reproductions; phrases 3 and 5 concerned the experience of life in original paintings; phrases 11, 12, and 14 were to do with the experience of resonance; phrases 4 and 6 related to forgetting the subject matter of the painting. I cut and pasted related statements together and looked for a common meaning underlying them. Using

some of Connie's words, I summarized related statements in one descriptive sentence. Preliminary theme-like statements were thus formed.

1. Connie experienced differences between original paintings in the museum and reproductions.
2. Connie felt that the original painting has its own life.
3. Connie compared her experiences of paintings to 'resonance' but was unable to articulate what this was.
4. Connie had forgotten the subject matter of the painting but remembered the use of colours and lines in it.

Themes are clusters of basic *meaning* units describing the experience, that have been extracted from the interviews with participants. The above statements were not yet themes, but topics that merited attention. It was only after many cycles of re-reading and re-writing that finer, more descriptive variations of themes pointing to certain significant aspects of the experience emerged. For example, after creating themes from several interview accounts and clustering related themes together, the theme 'experiencing differences between original paintings in museums and reproductions' was clarified and divided into the following sub-themes:

1. Experiencing paintings in a museum is feeling the presence of – or togetherness with – the original paintings.
2. Experiencing paintings in a museum is seeing the value of original paintings over reproductions.
3. Experiencing paintings in a museum fulfils the expectation of seeing original paintings.
4. Experiencing paintings in a museum is seeing 'life' in original paintings.

With these preliminary themes in mind, I read the whole account of the interview with Connie again and looked for specific descriptions that were related to them. At the beginning, themes were broad and general, leading to a 'vague and tentative' (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000: 72) understanding of a broad area of the experience. Themes gradually became more specific as the process of analysis progressed. However, sometimes the refining process was reversed, as a few broad themes could be grouped into an even broader theme or question which combined several themes. For example, the theme 'experiencing differences between original paintings in museums and reproductions' could be grouped under a very broad thematic question, 'How do we feel when we see paintings in a museum?'. Therefore, all the interview data have undergone what Cohen, Kahn and Steeves describe as the process of considering 'the meanings of the smallest units of data in terms of ever-increasing larger units of data and vice versa' (2000: 73).

After working on one interview account and searching for themes, I worked on another interview account. As a result, a spectrum of themes emerged and related themes across different interviews were grouped together. I then revisited all the interview accounts and studied them again with these themes in mind. During this process, themes were refined, prioritized and re-examined in conjunction with other themes. As the interviews took place over a period of more than three years, the process of reading interview accounts and searching for themes was also renewed whenever new participants' accounts were obtained. Themes are 'fasteners, foci' (van Manen 1997: 91) that disclose the meaning of an experience in a precise and explicit way. Giving meaning to themes involves 'insightful invention, discovery or disclosure – grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning' (van Manen

1997: 79). Since the meanings of an experience can never be exhausted, the uncovering of themes from interviews is an ongoing, gradual process during which new discoveries are constantly being made. However, at some point in the process of conducting the interviews and the thematic analysis, I discovered that new participants' experiences could easily be placed within the thematic framework, and at the same time, no further themes emerged from interview accounts after a certain number of rounds of detailed examination. It was at this point that I decided that the data collection and analysis would come to an end.

The difficulties in distilling themes from an interview lay in the complexity of human experience and the cluttered nature of recollections. As evidenced in participants' transcribed interviews, there were certain themes that threaded through the whole experience; however, at the same time, there were also areas which were redundant, irrelevant and disorganized. As museum visitors' experience of paintings is a complex experience, it is unsurprising that some of the themes identified did not fit with others, while some were idiosyncratic. There were some themes that appeared more frequently and to which I therefore paid more attention. There were others that I would set aside for a while and come back to at a later stage. However, at the initial stage, all data were treated as being of equal importance and with an equal amount of respect. Repetitions of certain ideas or terms by the participants were seen as a sign of emphasis while irrelevancy was considered as a variant of the experience. Throughout the process of analysis, the sensitivity, creativity and reflectivity of the researcher is instrumental to the quality and outcome of the research. As noted by van Manen (1997: 77), 'the insight into the essence of a phenomenon involves a process of reflectively appropriating, of clarifying, and of making explicit the structure of meaning of the lived experience'.

Further interviews with participants were conducted using themes as the basis for discussion. The purpose of such conversations was to allow the participants to reflect on the themes, looking for any misinterpretations or things that I had neglected. When I encountered areas of discrepancy and ambiguity in the data, I returned to the participants for further conversation. The sharing of data and findings with the participants served to establish reciprocity and reflexivity between the participants and myself. It was also a mutually informing process.

7.6 Presentation of findings

The presentation of research findings is in the form of qualitative text. 'Experience is not really meaningful', writes Madison, 'until it has found a home in language' (1988: 165). The themes, filled out with relevant descriptions of the participants' experiences, are presented in the next two chapters. Phenomenological writing, in addition to being a technique of presentation, is also a thinking, theorizing, reflecting, seeing, and showing activity (van Manen 1997). Van Manen maintains that 'writing is our method' (1997: 124). A piece of good phenomenological description is capable of capturing the essence of the experience and at the same time remains fresh and lively.

Phenomenological writing is all about telling 'stories', choosing examples, and uncovering the significance of these stories and examples. A *telling* story not only narrates but also *reveals* things in an insightful way, pointing directly and explicitly to the essence of the experience. Powerful phenomenological writing allows us to 'see through'

the description itself and points to the deeper significance of the experience. Therefore, exact words spoken by the participants and taken from the interviews were incorporated into the text to illuminate the descriptions. Phenomenology is 'a theory of the unique' and 'interested in what is essentially not replaceable' (van Manen 1997: 7). Therefore, the descriptions are actually an integration of the specific and the general, revealing the unique as well as the typical, providing concrete examples as well as essential structures. It is hoped that the descriptions will evoke meaningful insights and resonance from among readers who have had similar experiences. The reader's recognition of the experience portrayed by the researcher is an important indicator of the validity of the research. However, besides having agreement, making similar interpretations, or gaining a new understanding of the experience, it is possible that the reader will find differences from or even contradictions to his or her own experiences. In this case, what is important is that 'the reader can follow how the author came to interpretations they chose' or that they are content with 'simply believing that it is possible' (Moules 2002: 34).

A more detailed description of how themes are presented will be found in chapter eight.

7.7 Summary

For the present study, I engaged in phenomenological interviews with participants to collect accounts of their experience of paintings in a museum. Eight participants' experiences were included and they became the principal source of data for the main study. The participants were friends, acquaintances and students whom I came to know

during the study. After interviewing each participant twice, their accounts were transcribed and analysed thematically. The findings are presented in the form of phenomenological themes, which are basic meaning clusters underlying the experience and which include direct quotations from the interviews.

Chapter Eight:

Aspects of the Lived Experience of Paintings that Museum Visitors Can Articulate

8.1 Introduction

When the participants in this study were asked to share their experience of paintings in a museum, they talked about a number of themes which I found familiar. They also mentioned some things that I did not expect. I call the aspects of the experience that participants were able to articulate 'the articulated aspects of museum visitors' lived experience of paintings'. These aspects will be described in this chapter. I call the aspects that participants were not able to articulate 'the non-articulated aspects of museum visitors' lived experience of paintings'. These will be described in chapter nine. Maclagan states that people's experience of paintings involves a mixture of 'focused or articulate' and 'informal or inarticulate forms of understanding' (2001: 12). In this study, within the categories of both the articulated aspects and the non-articulated aspects, a number of major themes have been identified. Each major theme has been further divided into sub-themes, which point to some discrete but finer variations of the theme. Together, the themes described in chapters eight and nine may be understood as constituting the phenomenological structure of the experience.

In reflecting on their experience of paintings in a museum, the participants mentioned the

formal qualities of paintings, daily experiences associated with paintings, the people who made paintings, textual information related to paintings, reproductions of paintings, feelings evoked by paintings, and the museum environment. But what does each of these aspects mean to the experiencing person? Various themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the interviews. Lived experiential accounts of looking at paintings in museums drawn from the literature, including poems, novels, journal articles, diaries and research reports, are also included. In filling out the description of each theme, I have paid special attention to the 'lifeworld existentials' of *lived time* (temporality), *lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), and *lived other* (relationality) (van Manen 1997: 101-106). In this way, I hope to reinstate some of the phenomenological importance of the lived experience of paintings in a museum.

In the following sections, an introduction to each theme is presented, followed by quotations taken from the interviews and the literature, and concluding with a discussion of the experience and the meaning of the theme. While each theme reveals a single aspect of the lived experience of paintings in a museum, some themes which share a common concern are grouped together. Three broad categories emerged as a result of a careful consideration of the meaning of each theme. The first category of themes focuses on the different but somehow related ways in which museum visitors make sense of paintings. The second category of themes is a description of how museum visitors feel when they experience paintings. The third category of themes explores the significance of the museum environment in framing visitors' experience of paintings.

8.2 How do we make sense of paintings in a museum?

When the participants encountered paintings in a museum, they tried to understand them and to make sense of them, in order to have an experience that was meaningful. Most of the participants made sense of paintings in visual terms – that is, they used what they could *see* to find meaning. They also made sense of paintings in terms of their personal experience, prior knowledge, the textual and audio information available, printed reproductions of paintings and their knowledge of the painters concerned.

8.2.1 We make sense of paintings through our eyes.

The following are three comments overheard in art museums which have been documented by Judith Henry (2000):

> **I really love this painting but it has too much green in it.**
>
> This one over here is so horizontal.
>
> How does he make little pink lines on green look like grass? (Henry 2000: 4, 8, 59)

The above three museum visitors talk about the paintings in terms of their visual aspect. In a study of visitors' experience in art museums, Montgomery-Whicher (1987) also notes that speaking about the formal qualities of works of art is common among her informants. Most of the informants in Montgomery-Whicher's study were non-art specialists, and one of them, Lorna, described her experience of *Mount Temple* by Lawren Harris as follows:

> **... this great vertical development, and even though he has some diagonal lines, he has this nice, sort of flowing part at the bottom ... not too many lines going too many ways.**
>
> it's grey-white and then it's blue and then it's blue-white and it's peaceful, because, you know, he doesn't slap in a big hunk of red or something. (Montgomery-Whicher 1987: 104, 106)

Many of the participants in my study also began describing their experience of paintings using visual details. This is unsurprising, as after all, to many people, paintings are objects made for visual contemplation. From the basis of the visual details, participants would gradually begin to talk about how they felt about the paintings, specific incidents related to the paintings, memories which may have been stirred by the paintings, and many other visual aspects of the experience. It seems that much of the experience had been generated as a result of seeing the visual details of the paintings. A mention of the visual qualities of paintings was integrated into almost every line of the participants' descriptions.

8.2.1.1 Seeing the visual elements of paintings.

For some participants, the visual aspects of paintings dominated their experience. They emphasized, for example, seeing the colours, tones, textures, lines, spaces, shapes, pictorial boundaries and compositions of the paintings. Connie paid a great deal of attention to the visual aspect of paintings, in particular to colour, line and composition. She described Wu Guanzhong's painting *Wind From the Sea* in terms of its visual elements:

> *The colour is special. The main colours are black, white and grey, accompanied by some colourful dots and patches. Wu often uses a lot of horizontal and vertical lines in his works, but for this painting, he uses brush strokes in a slanting direction and colour fields more. He wants to show tree leaves.*

Although she might have difficulties in understanding how such formal elements work, Connie was ready to explore. She said that she liked to

> *spend time on the composition, the use of colours and study the special effects of paintings. Some masterpieces are famous for particular aspects. I try to discover what is distinctive about these paintings, but I can't always understand them.*

Finally, Connie made a strong statement about seeing the visual elements of a painting.

> *After all, I am looking at, not listening to, a painting. Therefore visual elements are very important.*

Referring to a painting entitled *The Homeless*, by Hong Kong artist Zhu Xinghua, Yoko, on a few occasions during the interview, emphasized the colours of the painting and the feelings associated with them:

> *This painting is not big and its tone is dim. Its colours match those of the wall and it hasn't got a strong frame. ... It seems to be very old and has a chrome yellow tint.*

> *The whole painting seems to fade out of colour or has been flooded by water. There are stains of yellow, black and brown everywhere, mixing with some hazy green.*

> *The colours of the painting are of a dark tone and they harmonize with each other. It provokes a kind of downhearted feeling.*

> *In addition to this, the earthy colour makes the painting look miserable. I don't know how to describe the ways in which these colours create a miserable atmosphere.*

To Connie and Yoko, the experience of these paintings in the museum was primarily visual. But what does it mean to the experiencing person if he or she describes the colours, compositions or lines of a painting?

Seeing the visual elements of paintings reflectively

Among all the visual aspects of paintings, the one mentioned most often by the participants was colour. When Connie talked about the colours of paintings, she was referring to the way colours were used to achieve certain visual effects. She said, '*painting is expressed through visual elements such as colours, lines and forms*'. To Connie, colour is a vehicle

to express something: for example, the meaning of the painting, the content of the painting, or the feeling of the painter. Here, colour assumed an instrumental role in achieving certain ends.

Sometimes, people experience the symbolic use of colour in paintings, as suggested by Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri (2001) in their study on the interpretive strategies of museum visitors in an art gallery. One of their respondents talked about a four-part drawing entitled *Requiem for Barbara I-IV* by Ana Maria Pacheco:

> Except for that one, it's red. Yes there's a lot of red and black which suggests to me a bit of anger or perhaps fear, because they look fearful, they look scary, with red writing as well on the black. (Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2001: 18)

When participants mentioned the visual aspect of paintings, sometimes they meant, for example, that colour had been used nicely or the composition was balanced. They were actually evaluating whether the use of the visual elements had achieved certain visual effects that they deemed desirable or effective. For example, Connie remarked, '*besides visual elements like colours, there are other aspects, such as the use of lines, that create a holistic impression*'. Connie was actually pointing out that lines, another visual element often mentioned by the participants, had been used in such a way as to create a holistic effect. The experiencing person is making a judgement about how the visual element has been used in terms of his or her knowledge or experience.

Seeing the visual elements of paintings pre-reflectively

For Yoko, however, it was the feeling associated with the colour that was more important. The colour of the painting became the main gateway through which Yoko began to interpret

the painting or through which she was able to get a general sense of the mood of what had been painted. Yoko's experience is significantly different from the experience of Connie and that of Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri's respondent, when considered from the phenomenological perspective. Yoko's experience pointed to a pre-reflective aspect of experiencing paintings, which is quite different from seeing paintings analytically. For Yoko, the feeling of colour was a strong, immediate and sensuous response to the painting, not a response developed out of reflective thinking – thinking analytically or symbolically.

Enhancing our vision in terms of seeing the visual elements embodied in everyday objects

Sometimes, the viewer's vision seems to have been changed or improved. The following poem by Fleur Adcock (1990) describes how her vision has been changed after visiting the Tate Gallery:

- Leaving the Tate -

Coming out with your clutch of postcards
in a Tate Gallery bag and another clutch
of images packed into your head you pause
on the steps to look across the river

and there's a new one: light bright buildings,
a streak of brown water, and such a sky
you wonder who painted it – Constable? No:
too brilliant. Crome? No: too ecstatic –

a madly pure Pre-Raphaelite sky,
perhaps, sheer blue apart from the white plumes
rushing up it (today, that is,
April. Another day would be different

but it wouldn't matter. All skies work.)

Cut to the lower right for a detail:
Seagulls pecking on mud, below
two office blocks and a Georgian terrace.

Now swing to the left, and take in plane-trees
bobbled with seeds, and that brick building,
and a red bus … Cut it off just there,
by the lamp-post. Leave the scaffolding in.

That's your next one. Curious how
these outdoor pictures didn't exist
before you'd looked at the indoor pictures,
the ones on the walls. But here they are now,

marching out of their panorama
and queuing up for the viewfinder
your eye's become. You can isolate them
by holding your optic muscles still.

You can zoom in on figure studies
(that boy with the rucksack), or still lives,
abstracts, townscapes. No one made them.
The light painted them. You're in charge

of the hanging committee. Put what space
you like around the ones you fix on,
and gloat. Art multiplies itself.
Art's whatever you choose to frame.
(Adcock 1990: 117)

In Chevalier's novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2000), Griet, a household maid who helps Vermeer to clean his studio and later sits for his paintings, becomes more attentive to things, especially their colours, after having a careful look at Vermeer's not yet completed *Young*

Woman with a Water Jug:

> The pitcher and basin were the most complicated – they became yellow, and brown, and green, and blue. They reflected the pattern of the rug, the girl's bodice, the blue cloth draped over the chair – everything but their true silver color. And yet they looked as they should, like a pitcher and basin.
> After that I could not stop looking at things. (Chevalier 2000:102)

In the cases of both Fleur and Griet, their attention to the visual aspect of paintings has been extended to daily objects and scenes. The experience of paintings has had an effect on the ways in which they see.

To Fleur, Griet and the participants quoted above, experiencing the visual aspect was a prominent part of their experience of paintings. It appears that their experience was dominated by attending primarily to the visual aspect of paintings. Merleau-Ponty (1947/1964) asserts that:

> In whatever civilization it is born, from whatever beliefs, motives, or thoughts, no matter what ceremonies surround it – and even when it appears devoted to something else – from Lascaux to our time, pure or impure, figurative or not, painting celebrates no other enigma but that of visibility. (Merleau-Ponty 1947/1964: 165-166)

8.2.1.2 Being seized by what is seen.

In a general sense, a visitor's experience of a museum begins when he or she walks into the museum environment, or even when simply anticipating visiting the museum. The experience of a particular painting begins with the immediate visual presence of the painting. In many cases, the attention initially paid to a painting by museum visitors begins with an interest in its visual elements. For example, it was the composition of Wu's *Forest at the Foot of Yulong Mountain* that first struck Linda. She was *first* attracted,

she said,

> *by the painting's composition, which is quite good. ... Indeed, I don't like paintings that are crammed with lines, colours ... and present no clear subject. The mountain is at the top and the trees are in the middle section of the painting. Though the mountain only takes up a small portion of the overall composition, it is the part that attracts me most. It's less solid. It's the most fascinating part.*

It was particular visual aspects of paintings that first caught the attention of the participants. Rather than making a discreet selection, the participants were seized by the visual elements of a painting. Having caught the viewer's attention, the painting holds that attention and the viewer begins to make sense of the painting. In this sense, the establishing of an interest in the visual aspect of paintings in the first place is an important feature of the experience. Initial attention or connection to the visual seems to be a prerequisite for involving museum visitors in paintings. However, as soon as we see, we think and interpret. Phenomenologically speaking, seeing, thinking and interpreting are all aspects of one act of seeing. Although it is impossible just to *look* at paintings without thinking about them, non-art specialists emphasize the visual dimension of the experience. In my conversations with the participants, '*see*' and '*look*' were the words they used most frequently. However, when we look at a painting, our eyes, mind and body are all involved. It is this indivisibility of seeing and thinking, perceiving and making meaning that Merleau-Ponty (1947/1964) is referring to when he says:

> There is no vision without thought. ... Vision is a conditioned thought; it is born "as occasioned" by what happens in the body; it is "incited" to think by the body. It does not *choose* either to be or not to be or think this thing or that. ... Such bodily events are "instituted by nature" in order to bring us to see this thing or that. The thinking that belongs to vision functions according to a program and a law which it has not given itself. (Merleau-Ponty 1947/1964: 175, italics in original)

When we find a painting interesting, we will continue to see more, discover more and think more about it. It is a dual process that marks our interaction with the painting. The seeing, thinking and interpreting process gives form to an experience of paintings, as Paskow (2004: 160) maintains: 'there is no "raw" or pristine perception of a work [of art] without some reflection on its meaning or without some attempt to situate the work according to a tacit or explicit agenda of specific concerns'. An interest in the visual aspect of a painting probably initiates the experience, but we have to consider that what appears to be a visual experience is not purely visual: it also includes the faculties of cognition, understanding and interpretation. When we say 'visual', it is easy for us to think in terms of seeing alone. When we talk about the visual dimension of viewers' experience of paintings, this seems to refer to an exclusive attention to the 'pure' visual form of paintings. Can we see visual forms without thinking? We see red. We understand red from seeing red petals, red apples, red cabbage .... For some people, red means debt or danger, for others, it means excitement, anger or love. We cannot confine our experience of red to the perception of a mere colour. *We see in the context of what we think and we think in the context of what we see.* We make connections, relate to past experiences and interpret. When Linda said, '*I am first attracted by the painting's composition, which is quite good*', what she meant was that the painting was organized in such a way that she could see, perhaps, its balance or unity. Balance or unity was what Linda drew out from the painting. Experiencing a painting is not only a seeing process, but a thinking and interpreting process as well.

In some of the accounts given by the participants, they said that they had been 'immediately

grabbed' by certain visual elements. It seems that visual involvement precedes other kinds of involvement. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson's study (1990) of museum curators' experience of artworks also reported that the perceptual dimension is the first and the most clearly articulated dimension among the four dimensions[1] they identify. In this study, the participants' apparent initial interest in the visual aspect may have been a result of the structure of talking about the experience. When the participants were asked to talk about their experience of paintings, they usually began the conversation by describing the painting: that is, what they saw initially. When we are asked to talk about something, we cannot talk about all aspects at once. We have to talk about something first and something later. This is a characteristic of the phenomenon of speaking. When the participants said that they were first attracted by the visual aspect, this may be understood as a logical way to begin presenting their experience. Although they are first attracted by the visual aspect of paintings, this does not preclude viewers from exploring paintings from other dimensions at the same time. Lankford (1984: 153) also notes that '[i]mmediate perceptions of a work of art integrate with reflections on the significance of lived experiences and synthesize, or fund, into a relatively full understanding of the work'.

In the previous section, I have pointed out that some participants experience the visual elements of paintings pre-reflectively, which may appear to contradict what I suggest here: that seeing always involves thinking and interpretation. To experience a painting pre-reflectively suggests that we do not engage in any theoretical or analytical thinking but respond immediately and sensuously to the painting. I argue that this kind of immediate,

[1] The other three dimensions are the emotional dimension, the intellectual dimension and the dimension of communication (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990: 28).

direct and sensuous response also involves thinking and interpretation. Our senses begin to develop when we are born and they are constantly moulded through social interaction and education. Inheriting what we have from the long history of human development and from the comparatively shorter period of personal experience, we develop a potential to respond to things without having to engage in conscious thought or reflection. This responding process happens so quickly that it *seems* no thinking is involved. However, thinking and interpretation have already permeated such pre-reflective responses. Thinking and interpretation are so much a part of our sensuous responses that sometimes such a response becomes a bodily experience.

8.2.1.3 Experiencing feelings conveyed by the forms of paintings.

When focusing on the formal elements of paintings, the participants experienced feelings of vibration, intensity, harmony, movement, contrast, rhythm, space and solidity. Referring to the ink paintings that she saw at the Brunei Gallery[2], Irene noticed that

> *... in Chinese paintings ... painters use the empty space to create something. They leave it blank, but the blank itself is something. And I like that space ... because it gives you room to imagine ... I can imagine things. ... The space becomes not only an empty space; it can tell you something.*

Talking about *The Siseta (after Millet)*, a painting by Van Gogh, Connie recognized that

> *The painting is mainly yellow in colour, but it is a special kind of yellow. It gives you a sense of vibration. ... Maybe it is the lines in the painting. He likes to use short lines with a curly shape. He likes to paint in this way. And the yellow, it is not a flat kind of*

[2] 'Hong Kong City Spaces – Ink Paintings in Transition' was an exhibition of paintings collected by the Hong Kong Museum of Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, held from July to September 2002.

colour. There are tone variations of the yellow. It gives you a feeling that they are moving and energetic.

To Irene, the blank area in a painting was considered as space, and such space created a feeling that allowed room for imagination. According to the expressionist theory, there is a difference between 'expressing emotion and betraying emotion' (Collingwood 1938: 121). Feelings conveyed by forms are quite different from feelings that are related to the content of a painting. To the expressionist, formal elements are capable of carrying feelings by themselves (Ridley 2003): for example, curved lines suggest a feeling of elasticity, while horizontal lines are often associated with a feeling of peacefulness. A portrait painting depicting a man sitting still can convey a sense of movement if the lines are drawn in a dynamic way. Therefore, when Connie said that the colour of the painting evoked a sense of vibration, this does not necessarily mean that there were any objects depicted in the painting as moving, but rather, that the colour itself had been presented in such a way that it created a sense of vibration. It thus appears that the viewer is considering the visual elements on their own, divorced from the content of the painting. Some theorists of the analytic aesthetic tradition (e.g., Aldrich 1968, Beardsley 1982a) suggest that the viewer does not have to ignore the content of the painting deliberately, but merely needs to attend to the formal aspect. But can we focus exclusively on the formal aspect of a painting without seeing its meaning or referring to its content? It seems unlikely. For example, when Linda mentioned the feeling created by space, she was referring to the empty space between mountains. In the painting Connie had experienced, the curly lines and yellow colour had been used to depict the haystack that the peasant couple were resting on. It is fairly common that the way in which forms are used echoes the content of a painting, and

we therefore experience them as inseparable parts of a whole. In the above cases, the form and the content of the paintings complemented each other. As soon as we see the form of a painting, we begin to interpret and make meaning out of it. In museum visitors' experience of paintings, both the form and content of paintings contribute to this process of making meaning.

8.2.1.4 Experiencing the beauty of paintings.

On a few occasions, the participants mentioned the beauty of the painting, or the experience of beauty. For some participants, beauty was something related to experiencing the visual or formal harmony associated with paintings. For example, Connie found the painting visually beautiful:

> *The title of the painting is Wind From the Sea. ... But if I see the painting without referring it to its title, I may treat it as a pure abstract painting: the rhythmic use of colour, the use of horizontal and vertical lines, the use of dots and fields ... These visual images are just beautiful.*

In another case, the participant did not refer to a specific visual aspect, but talked about the beauty of the painting in general. Linda said:

> *Because the painting is lit by natural light, I see the painting ... Monet's painting ... the essence or beauty of the painting is being drawn out by the natural light. ... That experience just makes me know that Monet's paintings have to be seen under natural light. Its beauty comes out with natural light.*

Although not specifically mentioning any particular visual element, Linda was talking about something related to the visual aspect of the painting. Yet another possible meaning attached to the idea of beauty was that the subject of the painting was beautiful. For

example, reflecting on her experience of Wu's *Two Swallows*, Linda found

> *... that Chinese architectural style is very special. To me, that kind of composition and architectural order is beautiful, especially when I see it in the town which is famous for its river scenes.*

However, there were some instances when participants talked about beauty in an even more general sense. Talking about three works painted by an artist friend, what Irene referred to as beautiful was a sense of having a satisfying experience:

> *Three paintings are placed together. They are like three parts of a series and they look continuous. No complicated compositions, but mountains and then a sun. ... I think that they are beautiful and I feel comfortable about these paintings. I feel that they are simple but powerful. ... So it is an overwhelming experience for me and ... they talk to me ... it is so beautiful.*

Irene's comments bring to mind the Platonic philosophic concept of equating truth, goodness and beauty. It seems that she is talking about the experience itself: that is, it is a beautiful experience to see paintings in a museum.

When participants used the words '*beauty*' or '*beautiful*' in their accounts of experiencing paintings in a museum, they meant different things. Firstly, in some instances, the terms were used to refer to the images that had been captured in the painting. For example, a beautiful scene, a beautiful piece of architecture or a beautiful person was painted. It is, however, difficult to determine whether participants meant that it was the subject itself which was beautiful or that the subject had been painted beautifully, although both these meanings are linked. Secondly, in some instances, participants might have meant that the painting was visually pleasing: making good use of visual methods to produce aesthetically

pleasing effects. Thirdly, in some instances, they might describe a positive experience of paintings in a museum as '*beautiful*', and this may have many meanings other than that the paintings themselves were visually pleasing. It may be that the experience made them feel relief, stimulated them to think or created space for reflection. To my surprise, participants did not emphasize their experience of beauty. It was not a predominant response and was only occasionally mentioned.

8.2.2 We make sense of paintings by relating them to our own experiences.

Rather than focusing solely on the visual images that they saw in paintings, the participants often mentioned things not found in the paintings. For example, they talked about their friends and families, places they had visited before, childhood memories, and sometimes paintings by other artists. Paradoxically, these 'unfound' things seemed to be at least as important as the 'found' or visible things participants saw in the paintings. It seems that *our eyes can 'complete' what is not presented in paintings*. From a phenomenological perspective, what we can see and what we cannot see constitute the experience of seeing the object. An object can only present itself by means of the absence of certain aspects that in turn permits the presence of other aspects. As Merleau-Ponty says, 'the appearance of "something," requires both this presence and this absence' (1947/1964: 16). These 'unfound' things may or may not be directly related to what is seen in the painting, but they are often related to participants' personal experience. The quest for connection between the viewer, others and the environment is common in museum visitors' experience of paintings. The participants drew upon their lived experience to interpret what they saw in

paintings; often this took a narrative form. That which a museum visitor brings to a painting and that which a painting brings to a museum visitor together constitute the experience of paintings in a museum.

8.2.2.1 Connecting the painting to daily experiences.

Some participants related the paintings to their real life experiences: for example, attending a seminar, being on a beach, seeing a photo, being in a typhoon, remembering historical knowledge and theories learnt at school, going to the cinema and visiting other museums. Connie connected her experience of paintings to her previous and current daily experiences. She associated the paintings with books she had read, conversations with people and visual images that she had 'collected' during daily activities. There was a direct relationship between what was seen and what was associated with it: for example, seeing a painting of a green field reminded Connie of scenery of a similar nature; in her own words:

> *There is a painting entitled Green Nursery. ... It is a painting mainly in green and yellow. There are lots of green sprouts shooting up, with young leaves ... The plants are arranged in high and low positions and there are big ones and small ones, forming a pattern of systematic variations; it captures vividly the image of a field of green plants. The colours and ... other visual elements are well used. ... The painting combines with what I have experienced and with visual images that have existed in my mind. ... Once I saw a photo on a calendar. It shows a scene that I have been longing for. What is the scene like? There is a young lady, beautifully dressed, standing in a large field of grassland with small yellow flowers scattered around. ... Blue sky with a slight breeze blowing in from the sea. I have this picture in mind all the time.*

For Ken, the experience of Zhou Luyun's painting *Break Through I* reminded him of a film he had seen a long time ago. Ken noticed,

> ... *the sphere is going to explode and is getting the power to destroy. This scene*

reminds me of a film I've seen - Laputa: Castle in the Sky. At the end of the film, the ground of the flying castle disintegrated into pieces of rock and burst all over the sky.

Writing about his experience of Edward Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, American literary critic Alfred Kazin (2000) relates it to a street scene in New York city, a place he loved very much:

> *Early Sunday Morning*, which Hopper painted in 1930, has haunted me as no other New York painting ever has. Hopper brought to the silent street – the barber pole, the fire hydrant, the uneven line of window shades, the awnings over the shop fronts – the intensity of his own perception. Every time I come back to it, *Early Sunday Morning* seems larger than I remembered it. Since nothing is so typical of New York as the certain disappearance of something we once loved, the doggedness of Hopper's attachment had to be painted large. (Kazin 2000: 24)

Although the experience of paintings in a museum is not an experience that we have every day, it is often linked to our everyday experience. Museum visitors' experience cannot be isolated from other experiences in the sense that we always experience against the background of other experiences. Spiegelberg (1975: 179) once said, 'No experience is sharply circumscribed by precise contours.' Therefore, it is the many connections with people, ideas, events or other paintings that constitute a significant part of the experience. Making connections is a personal and intricate matter. There are no rules that govern how we make connections, but we connect to something we know, something we see and something that we have experienced before. There are also no rules about when this will happen. For instance, Connie said, '*sometimes associations with daily experience arise at the moment when I am looking at the painting. Sometimes associations come to my mind after I have seen the painting. Both occur.*'

Mary Gordon (2000), a novelist and an English professor, describes how she thought about Bonnard's painting *Young Women in the Garden* while she watched her ninety-year-old mother in the dining room of a nursing home for old people:

> In one painting that survives, *Young Women in the Garden*, Renée is suffused in a yellow light that seems like a shower of undiluted sun; her blonde hair, the bowl of fruit, the undefined yet suggestively fecund floral background, are all saturated with a yellowness, the distilled essence of youthful hope. Renée sits, her head resting against one hand, a half smile on her face, her light eyes catlike and ambiguous; she sits in a light-filled universe, in front of a table with a striped cloth, a bowl of apples, a dish of pears. ... I am thinking of this painting as I stand in the corner of the dining room, watching my mother from the side ... How can it be, I wonder, that Renée – who inhabited a world of yellow light, striped tablecloths, red and russet-colored fruit, a world in which all that is good about the physical presented itself in abundance – chose to end her life? While these old people, sitting in a windowless room with nothing to look at but the hysterical colored TV screen, their bodies failing, aching, how can it be that they are fighting so desperately for the very life that this woman, enveloped in such a varied richness, threw away? (Gordon 2000: 40-41)

For Connie and Mary, the experience of paintings was woven into their daily experiences. Sometimes it was the painting that reminded them of something that had happened. On other occasions, it was something that happened in their daily lives that reminded them of the painting. *There is certain reciprocity between paintings and everyday life.* We call on our life experience to make sense of paintings and we call on our experience of paintings to make sense of daily life. Museum visitors connect paintings to their environment and the people around them, such as their families and friends. The following phrases overheard at a museum provide more examples:

> We have five pictures like that on our fridge.
>
> I wish Renoir were around to paint Jonathan.
>
> Let's see if one of these looks like Eric; he's the only Egyptian we know. (Henry 2000: 21, 28, 43)

For Irene, visiting a place where there were trees would somehow renew her experience of Cézanne's painting *L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny*:

> *Sometimes they just come like that. Yes, for example, just like Cézanne's painting. If I am in a garden or if I visit a natural site with a lot of green stuff like trees and grass, Cézanne's painting will come back to my mind.*

Linda, who was very interested in Chinese literature, found that a seminar she had attended, an opera she had seen, a poem she had read ... were the things that came to her mind when she came across Wu Guanzhong's paintings in the museum. She remembered that

> *the first part of the exhibition is mainly paintings about rural places. It is obvious that these works are full of memories and love of the country. For example, there are paintings of snowy mountains, grassland, village houses and ... apparently scenes of the country. What a coincidence it is that I attended a seminar two days ago! A group of Chinese scholars, from overseas or the Mainland, discussed nationalism. ... When I saw Wu's paintings, my first impression was that they became 'footnotes' to what I heard at the seminar.*

For Fred, his experience of paintings was very much connected to what he had learnt during his university studies. He interpreted many of the paintings he saw from the basis of the knowledge and views of China that he had derived from his lifelong interest in Chinese culture and Chinese literature. Referring to Wu's painting *The Great Wall*, he said,

> *The Great Wall symbolizes isolation and a hierarchy differentiating between the civilized and the uncivilized. It pushes away those 'uncivilized people' outside China. Extending this phenomenon to the current situation in China ... control, restrictions ... originally a symbol of civilization, the Great Wall is now distorted as something else. The painting reminds me of the control exerted over politics, over people or even over human nature in China. ... The feeling of distortion is even stronger when I see the painting from a distance. All the straight lines are distorted ...*

Wu's paintings assumed a special meaning for Fred. He was trying to interpret the painting from his own understanding: his historical knowledge and views of China. We interpret paintings in terms of what we know. On another occasion, Fred said that another one of Wu's paintings – *Blowing in the Wind* – was connected to his current mood:

> *The size of the painting is not too big. But the things which are flowing around are comparatively dense. ... Those in the front are bigger and those at the back are smaller. They flow in different directions. It gives me the feeling that they want to escape from the surface of the painting. They want to break through the solid background, but they can't. So the painting makes a deep impression on me. Perhaps it's something related to my current mood. I am reminded of how I feel at the moment. I want to get through something but I can't.*

By making connections to our lived experience, we gradually build up what paintings mean to us. This meaning is not like the historical information, visual analysis or stylistic explanation that we commonly find in books about paintings. It is our own understanding or interpretation of the painting. In the process of constructing understanding or interpretations, our past and daily experiences mediate between us and the painting. The painting becomes the focal point where bits and pieces of previous experiences intertwine to make a new experience in the present – the experience of paintings in a museum. Just like making a patchwork quilt, the viewer stitches patches of experience together when he or she is engaged with paintings in a museum. The viewer's present experience (experience of paintings in a museum) is always taking into account his or her past experiences. Our experience of paintings cannot exist by itself, it has to exist in relation to many facets of our lives: for example, places that we have visited, incidents that happened in the past and people we have met. With the inclusion of personal experience, what we experience goes beyond what we see in paintings. In this sense, museum visitors'

experience of paintings is 'always more' than the paintings themselves. The experience continues to expand over time with the influx of new experiences, whether visitors actually return to see the paintings again or simply remember them. A painting in itself is a finite entity, whereas the experience of paintings has infinite possibilities. It will continue to grow as we become more experienced. And that is why we like to return to museums to see our favourite paintings, as reflected in Mandy's account that '*I have seen this painting at least four or five times since I was a secondary school student. ... I will pay a visit to the painting whenever I come back to the gallery*', and in the words of another visitor, quoted by Henry, who said: 'I come back to see this often – like an old friend' (2006: 6).

8.2.2.2 Connecting paintings to images that we have seen.

We sometimes construct our experience of paintings using images that we have seen somewhere else. Although unintentionally, we are constantly engaged in collecting a vast number of images during our daily activities (Broudy 1987) and building up our repertoire of visual images. Linking paintings with some of our past visual experiences and visual concepts about things, we experience paintings in a more vivid way. In particular, we relate what we see in paintings to visual images found in other paintings, other artworks or other forms of art. We tend to connect paintings with other things of a similar nature – objects made for contemplation – and in particular, with pictures, whether they are paintings or visual images in other media. As noted by Sutton, 'most [museum visitors] experience artworks in *relation* to one another' (2003: 48). For instance, when Connie talked about Wu's *Two Swallows*, she compared its sense of clearness to a Chinese jade carving:

There is a tree without leaves in the painting. It looks like only bare branches are left ... but if you look carefully, the tree has not totally withered. It is not dead. It still has the strength to survive. New leaves will shoot out as soon as the winter has passed ...Yes, a sense of clearness ... not that kind of dead silence or a sense of desertedness ... A strong association comes to my mind right now ... like a Chinese white cabbage made of jade with patches of bright green ... a warm and transparent feeling ...

The participants sometimes related paintings to works by another artist. For example, when Connie talked about the painter Wu Guanzhong, she also mentioned Li Keran. Both these painters like to paint the Chinese landscape, but in different styles. Connie, speaking about the *Two Swallows*, said:

When I see the painting, it makes me think of the works of Li Keran, though Wu and Li have different styles. ... Li's paintings contain more areas of black and lesser areas of white. But Wu's painting is just the opposite: a lot of white areas and small patches of black. I place the two paintings together in my mind.

She continued:

I always have associations like this: placing artists with similar styles together.

Participants' knowledge and experience of other artists or other paintings contextualized their present experience of paintings. For example, Irene made an interesting comparison between the portrait paintings of David Hockney and portrait photos. She recognized that

People who have been portrayed in paintings are more serious than those in photos. People portrayed in photos are livelier, more relaxed. ...paintings are very different from photos. Maybe because paintings take time to process and photos are just instant ... at that moment ... it's more ... in a way photos are more spontaneous.

By comparing three paintings that were placed next to each other, Fred saw clearly Wu's

stylistic development, something that he would not have recognized if he had seen only one painting:

> *If I see the painting on its own, I don't feel much about it. But if I look at it in the context of other paintings - for example, there are two paintings next to it, one is the Former Residence of Qiu Jin and the other I forget its title [Reminiscence of Jiangnan] – I can make a comparison. ... I can see the change of style from the early realistic stage to the stage of integrating realism with abstraction and to the final stage of abstraction.*

Usually the paintings that participants recalled had something in common with the current painting, such as genre, style or content. Using old images to interpret new images requires the establishment of certain links between the images themselves: for example, seeing their similarity or differences. The making of such linkages is a learning process. Knowledge is constructed when we know things as they are and can also see how they are related to each other. Irene's comparison enriched her understanding of two different genres: painting and photography. Connie's placing of two painters' work together helped her see the stylistic differences. When Fred compared the three paintings which were placed next to each other, he was able to trace the artistic development of the painter. In this sense, a museum visitor's experience of paintings is also a learning process, although such a process is personal, informal, self-initiated and difficult to assess.

8.2.2.3 Building up a meaningful personal narrative.

On the basis of related events, people, objects or experiences, each participant built up his or her understanding and interpretation of the paintings. This understanding and interpretation sometimes took the form of a narrative which was meaningful to the participant. The following is an account given by Mandy of seeing Deng Ningzi's

painting *They're Growing up*:

> *While I am looking at the painting, I see the place where I used to live. Though the environment depicted in the painting is quite nice with some beautiful chairs in the background, I am not interested in it. It is my own place that comes to my mind. I come from a poor family. The place where I used to live was humid, old and dirty. I have a very vivid memory of my childhood. Indeed, my life as a child was quite interesting. The place was small and our family had a very close relationship. Now we are all grown up and everybody is very busy. Our relationships with each other are not as close as they were when we were young ... we stayed at home most of the time and we felt close to everything found in the house.*
>
> *I can see not only the living environment, but also things that happened. I remember once my brother was riding a small tricycle which was red and white in colour. While my brother was cycling around the house, I was naughty and I tried to step on the front part of the tricycle. It caused an accident and my brother hit his head badly. The back of his head was bleeding heavily. Relatives who lived a few floors away were called immediately for help. I hid myself behind the washroom door and peeped through the door. I was frightened and didn't dare look. I saw a few people carry him to hospital and all I could do was cry.*

Mandy's account of her experience of this painting brought to mind her childhood memories and was meaningful to her in a number of ways. She reflected on her life: the past and the present, and she examined her current life. She thought of other people, the artist who created the work, those she cared about and those she did not know very well. She thought about her relationships with them in general or in particular. For Mandy, the museum has become a place where she re-creates her 'personal past in the public space' (Carr 1996: 5). As noted by Carr,

> Every life writes a text with hidden pages, some unreadable even to their author. But there are illuminating moments in museums, found in no other places, when such pages become visible and their messages become clear. An object suggests an idea we have not encountered in years. An exhibition holds a theme that touches our forgotten schooling. We see an image of a past time and place, and we

recognize it as the experience of our family, or of a family like our own. (Carr 1996: 5)

With regard to another participant, Joe, his experience of paintings was closely related to his adult life and family background. His experience was a direct reflection of his family values and personal aspirations. Talking about the painting *Sir Thomas More, his Father, his Household and his Descendants* by Rowland Lockey, Joe recalled:

> *Thomas More was the English Chancellor during the reign of Henry VIII. When I see the painting ... not only Thomas More is in the painting, but also his family. ... I can see that the painter wants to show the strength and prosperity of the More family. From the painting, you can see the clothes they wear, the background ... You know ... I like reading histories of successful people. I want to know how they achieve success and how they become influential in their own era. I think history is a mirror of life. ... It's more than a painting; it's a record of the history. I'm not seeing this painting from the standpoint of a painter, for example, from the point of view of perspective, colour or composition. What I see is the flourishing of the More family. ...*
>
> *It is something related to my family. Perhaps the current Hong Kong society no longer emphasizes family values and bonds. For example, if you become successful one day, it is you, but not your family, being credited. I come from a rather traditional family. My family and I emigrated to Hong Kong from mainland China when I was young. In particular my father has a very strong sense of family belonging. I grew up in an environment where traditional Chinese values were emphasized. To me, success is related to my family. ... I am a hard-working, aggressive person. I want to achieve. When I see a painting that can represent achievement, power or recognition, I will have a strong feeling of that. Ah, yes, that's it! People should live like that. Life should be like that.*

By blending our past experiences with the present, we try to contextualize what we see in paintings and build up a narrative that makes sense to us. Silverstone points out that visitors are actually not 'consuming' the painting in a museum passively, but actively

'creat[ing] their own versions of the narratives' on top of the narratives created by the museum and the painting (1994: 167). Such a narrative is individualistic, reflective and interpretative in nature. In most instances, it is private and there is no need to share it with others. However, this does not mean that such a narrative has to be a totally un-sharable, idiosyncratic monologue. It can be shared because we live in the same world, we communicate using common languages, and there are many things in the world that we all share, as Paskow points out: we are 'beings-in-a-common-world' (2004: 223).

When we are asked to articulate our experience of paintings, we sometimes organize our accounts in the form of narratives. The narrative is a reflection of our lived experience, a remembering of events from our life histories. It goes beyond what is visually grasped from paintings. Such a narrative is an important private space in which museum visitors develop, on their own, how and what paintings mean to them. Sometimes, certain kinds of painting may allow more space for the viewers, while at other times it is the viewer who actively creates space for himself or herself. For example, Fred said that space in paintings would create space for him to think about himself, the world or his own feelings:

> *The most important is that ... not every part of the painting is occupied, I can make many associations. I don't think in a complicated way and sometimes ... I need some stimulation. The best thing is for there to be no concrete frameworks to restrict my thinking. But at the same time it can stimulate me to think. Think about myself, my stuff, the world or my own feelings.*

We find meaning in most of the activities that we engage in our daily lives. For example, we go to school to learn, we go to work to earn a living, or we travel around to relax. Some of the meanings of these activities are 'assigned' by others, rather than our finding

personal meaning in these activities. But the experience of paintings in a museum is largely a personally meaningful experience during which museum visitors find a personal meaning in the paintings.

8.2.3 We make sense of paintings by relating to the painter.

When we come to a painting in a museum, we always want to know who has painted it. For some people, there is a need to establish a relation with the person who has painted the painting. When we talk about a painting, it can be difficult not to mention the painter's name if we know it. To name something or somebody is to 'call into existence' that thing or person (Gusdorf 1953/1965: 38). If we know who the painter is, we feel secure. We feel that we can relate to him or her personally. In their experience of paintings in a museum, most of the participants had an inclination to name the painter and to relate to some of the painter's qualities and techniques that they observed.

8.2.3.1 Relating to the painter's thoughts, emotion and concerns.

Besides mentioning the social and historical facts about the painting: for example, its owner, place of collection, the date and period when it was created, the participants also mentioned the names, personalities, life stories and events in the lives of painters. The participants identified the painting with the painter. They were concerned with the person who had created the painting. For example, Fred wanted to '*communicate with the artist even though I don't know him or it's impossible to know him*'. Some participants talked about how the painter had influenced others or how the painter might have been influenced. In

particular, some participants related to the painter's passion, concern, emotion, power, intelligence and creative potential. They felt connected to the painter and they experienced the painting as an expression of the painter – a belief of the expressionist and modernist theory.

Irene appreciated Gauguin's interest in and respect for people from a different culture:

> *It is a painting [Te Rerioa or The Dream] by Gauguin. ... He is exceptional ... I like most of his paintings so far. ... I think he is an anthropologist painter because he not only painted about ... human life or objects, but he also brought a cultural element to the paintings. I really appreciate his ... openness to ... people in other societies or in other cultures. I wish there were more painters like him.*

When talking about her experience of Van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters*, Irene commented on Van Gogh's sympathetic attitude towards hard-working rural people:

> *It's about some people, maybe working class people, in a very dark room eating potatoes together. I like this painting ... it talks to me in a sociological way. It makes me feel that Van Gogh is a sociologist who tries to reveal the different aspects of a society.*

After seeing the painting *The Homeless*, which shows several people wandering around, Yoko related to the painter's inner feelings:

> *I don't know the artist but I think that he or she must be a person who has experienced loneliness profoundly.*

Irene's admiration for Gauguin was related to her interest in social issues. As a student of sociology herself, it was likely that she would acknowledge those painters who showed concern for people from different social and cultural backgrounds. In a more general sense, Irene's assumption that Van Gogh was motivated by a social conscience is a

reflection of the eighteenth-century romantic belief that the artist is a forward-looking, sensitive and expressive member of society. She was focusing on the artist's personality, his mission and vision. For Yoko, looking at the subject matter of the painting, the painting itself was a demonstration of the personality, quality or experience of the painter. Thus, to Yoko, seeing the painting was seeing the painter in person. It seemed that she came to know the painter better through the painting. Establishing relations with the person who painted the painting is to situate the painting in a human context. Without actually having met one another, the viewer and the painter have been engaged in a relationship.

8.2.3.2 Relating to the painter's manifested techniques.

Some participants focused more on the manifested techniques of the painter: for example, they talked about the creative idea, technical competence and stylistic expression of the painter. They experienced the painting as an expressive form created by the painter, but not necessarily as the direct expression of the painter.

Ken admired Zhou's originality in using Chinese ink and brush in a non-traditional way. Referring to the painting *Break Through I*, Ken said that Zhou

> *has done a very good job. When I first saw the painting, I thought that it may be a recent work. After reading the caption, I found out that it is a work of a few decades ago. ... I suppose that it is only recently – within the last ten years – that we have used traditional media in some ground-breaking ways. ... I would not have expected that people were doing this as early as the 70s. I think that the artist is really intelligent in foreseeing such a possibility for development. ... She has extended the boundaries of how to use Chinese ink and brush. Perhaps this also is a kind of breakthrough.*

Amazed by the spontaneity and freshness of the painted surface and the incised lines, Mandy was curious about the technique that Deng used in the painting *They're Growing Up*:

> *When I first encountered the painting, it was the way the artist used the medium that attracted my attention. I have never used the medium in this way before and I found it very interesting. The painter does not just paint, she pours paint over the canvas and she even incises lines on it in order to express something. It is different from what we usually do. We just paint or cut and paste so as to create a painting or a collage. I'm interested in the medium and the ways that the painting is created. It broadens my horizons.*

Fred said that Wu had done a good job in painting The Great Wall without subscribing to realistic techniques. He thought that,

> *the painter has done an amazing job. I'm seeing the painting from an 'inappropriate' angle, but I can still recognize it. That's why I say that the artist is really doing very well. ... I should give credit to the painter ... for he can convey the content through his brush strokes, curvy lines and circles.*

Referring to a Victorian painting, *Farm near Brocklehurst*, the following description shows a museum visitor's painstaking attention to the artist's painting technique:

> **... if you look at this guy's style of painting, the trees are less believable and less successful, particularly these big ones here, you know the actual brush strokes, he loses the lines a little bit, it just looks messy, compared to the clarity of the people's faces, or the detail he's brought out and the detail round here and I mean the houses, and even the colours in the sky, the trees are very weak.**
> **(A respondent's comments in a study on interpretative strategies at an art gallery, in Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2001: 26)**

Ken, Mandy, Fred and the museum visitor in Hooper-Greenhill's study were commenting on the *work* that the painter had done. To them, the painter had demonstrated a certain painting skill or a method of painting that they found either admirable or mediocre. The

skill or method was manifested in the painting's visual aspect. All four of them were seeing the paintings in terms of a human piece of work, showing evidence of personal effort and intelligence. Again they were placing the painting in a human context where connections with others are emphasized. Phenomenologically speaking, the participants experienced a lived relationship with others.

8.2.4 We use textual information to make sense of paintings.

When the participants were engaged with paintings in a museum, they used whatever information they could find to help them make sense of the paintings. Some participants looked at what was painted, some into their internal experiences and some for the meanings of the paintings through whatever texts were available. On the one hand, the participants interpreted the paintings with the help of textual information, such as the titles of the paintings or the stories of the painters. Alternatively, they searched for the relationships that might exist between the texts and the paintings. They searched for intertextuality between texts and images.

8.2.4.1 Connecting the painting to textual information.

To some participants, connecting texts related to paintings was an important part of their experience. The texts might be the titles of paintings, captions, curatorial notes or illustrative panels adjacent to paintings, free brochures, catalogues or handouts prepared by museum personnel. They are 'the language produced by the institution, in written or spoken form, for the consumption of visitors, which contributes to interpretative practices

within the institution' (Ravelli 2006: 1). Or they may be the painter's written account of his or her own paintings, newspaper coverage or review articles on exhibitions, art history books related to painting styles or even literature related to the content of paintings.

Textual information played a significant part in Linda's experience of paintings. First attracted by the pictorial elements, Linda explored the painting further through textual means, thus initiating an active interplay between textual and pictorial symbols in her subsequent looking at and interpretation of paintings. For Linda, reading relevant literature such as a poem, a caption, a commentary or an introduction about paintings was likely to enrich her experience. Linda's experience of a painting depicting children had been informed by her knowledge of a poem carrying a similar theme of childhood. She constantly sought references to what she saw in what she read. She said she would have had difficulty relating

> *the painting to children anticipating their future ... if I haven't read the poem. It has an interesting effect when the poem and the painting are placed together. The painting becomes more meaningful to me. If I look at the painting on its own, I will not feel the same way.*

Textual information may help people understand what they see in a general sense. As noted by Hooper-Greenhill et al., 'labels encouraged visitors to spend more time looking at an exhibit as they provided new insights' (2001: 27). When people read textual information about paintings before or after seeing them, they obtain an orientation towards what they are going to see or what they have seen. Such an orientation is important since it provides a direction and a context for understanding the painting. To most people, written text is easier to understand than visual text. Therefore, these participants,

particularly because they were non-art specialists, often resorted to textual means. Joe, for instance, liked to read journalistic reports about paintings. He remembered reading an article on *The Arnolfini Portrait* which he describes as follows:

> *The article commented on the use of perspective, the ideas of the painter, etc. Though these comments may be some people's interpretation, it's good to see how other people interpret paintings. ... the text noted that objects which do not appear in the picture are reflected in the mirror. Even though I had actually seen the painting at the National Gallery, I did not notice that.*

When Yoko looked at *The Homeless*, she recalled a Chinese poem she knew:

> *The first few lines are 'Wheels after wheels, horses after horses, people carrying bows on their backs'. It's about people going to war.*

Using diaries of museum visits as a source of data, Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson (2002) conducted a study on museum encounters. One of the participants in their study, Sara, an educational psychologist, writes about her experience of looking at thangkas[3] paintings at the Tibet House in New York:

> **My feeling for and understanding of the painting is expanded with the description provided in the exhibit catalog. I felt happy and excited that I could be in a situation where I could both study the painting and have the detailed description of the iconography in the painting. I also felt that although there is more for me to understand about these paintings, this visit provides a unique and welcome study in detail ...** (Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson 2002: 127)

Language and paintings represent reality in different ways. Both language and paintings make use of signs and symbols. Within each domain, there is an elaborate system, each with its own internal logic regarding the use of these signs and symbols. There are

[3] Thangkas are sacred Buddhist paintings which are made for the purpose of supporting meditation practice.

similarities as well as differences between these two systems. When we see paintings, we may look for the relation between the pictorial and language symbols. When a text related to a painting is available, we tend to search for the meaning of the two texts that are presented to us: the visual and the written texts. If we see no correlation between the two, we may resort to other ways of understanding the painting. For some visitors, a search for intertextuality typifies their experience of paintings in a museum. The visual text, however, is far more open to interpretation than are written or verbal texts. While navigating between the two texts, people inter-contextualize what they see with what they read. Such contextualization of paintings with written texts is an important aspect of museum visitors' experience of paintings.

8.2.4.2 Interpreting the meaning of the painting through its title.

Although interpretative labels have become more common in museums in the last decade, most paintings in museums are still supported by little more than 'tombstone labels' and 'introductory, declarative text panels' (Worts 2003: 221). Although the information given is minimal, for some participants, titles and captions were regarded as important sources of information. When a title is not available, there is a possibility that museum visitors will feel offended and make comments such as: 'Untitled, Untitled, Untitled! Couldn't someone with so much imagination think of a title?' (Henry 2000: 27). The title sometimes became key to understanding the paintings. The participants looked for coherence in the title, content and expression of the paintings. They usually first looked at the painting and then read its title. Yoko mentioned that when she connected the meaning of the title to what she saw in the painting entitled *The Homeless*, she realized that the title appropriately

summed up the meaning of the content of the painting. As she looked more deeply, she said she found the painting more interesting:

> *I think that the title is very important. The title describes the content of the painting very well. If the title were not The Homeless, it's possible its attractiveness would be vastly reduced. ... In other words, the content of the painting is expressed very well. There is a harmony between the expression and the content.*

Like Yoko, Irene looked to the title for information about a painting by David Hockney, to see if the painting itself provided sufficient data for understanding or interpretation:

> *There are two guys sitting on a chair in the painting. ... However, I couldn't see how they were related. I don't get a message from the painting ... and then in the title, not a clue showing who they are or how they are related. That's the only painting by David Hockney where I couldn't work out the relationship between the two sitters.*

Linda worked extensively with titles of paintings which provided her with an effective way of interpreting paintings. She looked for the relation between the title and the visual aspect of a painting. Sometimes it was the title rather than the painting that attracted Linda's attention. She said, '*Even if I am not interested in the painting, I will have a glance at its title. If the title is interesting enough, I will go back to the painting.*' In some cases, Chinese characters written on a painting took the place of titles. These characters not only served as compositional devices in the painting, but also provided clues for the participants to interpret. This is a special feature of Chinese paintings not often found in Western paintings. Linda liked to explore the words found on the painting, saying of Wu's painting *Reminiscence of Jiangnan*,

> *I do not feel anything special. ... Wu likes very much to include a few words or a phrase as a kind of expression in his works. To me, this is a big advantage. If I see a painting on its own without a title or any kind of written introduction, I can't get anything out of it,*

especially when it's an abstract painting.

However, there were also cases where participants found the title of the painting did not match what they saw. For example, Fred found one painting

quite contradictory, for the title of the painting is Blowing in the Wind and I assumed that the painting would convey a sense of flowing or a feeling of softness. But the background of the work is a kind of heavy black ... I have a sense of heaviness and solidity. It's totally different from what the title suggests. ... Judging from the title Blowing in the Wind, the painting should show something that is light and can really flow. Therefore, when I look at the painting again, I begin to puzzle: why do the things in the painting look so heavy and solid?

Rather than searching for references from their internal framework, museum visitors sometimes look to the external framework to help them interpret paintings. The title chosen by the painter becomes an important piece of information that viewers can obtain in a museum. Bringing out its essence or theme, the title of a painting helps museum visitors focus their attention on the meaning. For example, Mandy said, '*As revealed by the title of the painting They're Growing Up, I discover that the artist has adopted the perspective of parents.*' The title helped Mandy better understand the painting from the perspective chosen by the painter and to explore it from such a perspective. Vallega (2002: 192) argues that 'in the experience of painting', there is an 'inseparability between name/title and work'. Vallega further notes:

> A common experience with painting today is that we encounter them as double works, as the work itself and its representation by title or name. This is the case not only for figurative works such as landscapes, still lifes, and portraits, but also for nonfigurative painting. In the case of some nonfigurative painting the name remains representative even when the name appears as "untitled." For both figurative and nonfigurative painting the representation by name is taken to indicate the artist's intention and thereby serves to locate the meaning of the work. The viewer looks to the name to gain the sense of the work. (Vallega 2002: 177)

Other than the painting's title, any form of textual information about a painting, when provided by the museum, is deemed by most museum visitors to be a reliable, ready-made interpretation of the painting. Therefore, a title is a symbol of authority, a sign showing how the painting should be seen or should be interpreted. It is something produced by the author of the painting who is supposed to be knowledgeable about the painting. In actual experience, the participants considered a painting and its title as an integrated whole and experienced them together. The title added an extra layer of meaning to the painting and both were considered important by many participants.

Some participants took the titles of paintings seriously. Which was more important, the title or the painting? Some participants gave the written text priority over the visual image. For example, Ken said, '*Considering the title of the painting, I think that it has successfully created the feeling of 'breaking through'. The image of the painting adequately expresses the meaning of its title*'. Yoko also said something similar: '*Its title really matches its content – describing a group of homeless, lonely, destitute people*'. For Ken and Yoko, the painting had to reflect the meaning of the title. Fred's puzzlement over the painting *Blowing in the Wind* was also an indication that he assumed that the painting had to reflect the title. Such prioritization of text over visual image is common in many cultures. Although the text may be open to interpretation, nevertheless, when compared to visual images, it is less arbitrary and there is less scope for interpretation. In this sense, text is seen as more reliable than visual images, particularly for museum visitors who have no formal training in analysing or interpreting visual images. It is possible that they have less faith in their immediate, sensuous experience and their own interpretations when compared

to art specialists. It is likely that museum visitors who have art training are more confident and that they trust their senses more when looking at paintings.

The relating of text to image in an experience of painting will be further discussed in chapter nine.

8.2.4.3 Interpreting the meaning of the painting through audio text.

There is yet another type of 'text' available at museums – audio guides. These are the 'sound scripts' of paintings and are becoming commonplace since their first appearance in the 1960s in American museums (Fisher 1999: 24). Between 1993 and 2003, the Art Gallery of Ontario collected written feedback from museum visitors who had used a specially developed audio programme to help visitors explore the painting *The Beaver Dam*, a landscape painting by the Canadian artist J. E. H. MacDonald (Clarkson and Worts 2005). The following is the feedback provided by a 31-year-old Toronto lawyer who visits the gallery frequently:

> For one of the first times, a painting was more than just a collection of haphazard shapes and colors. The idea of closing one's eyes when "looking" at art was an astounding one--and a phenomenal experience. After closing my eyes and imagining, then opening them, I stepped immediately into the painting, which suddenly had more depth than any high-tech hologram image. You've forced me to have to come back again and again to the gallery--no more of that quick touristy glance as I whiz by. Thanks so much. (Clarkson and Worts 2005: 274)

Another respondent of Clarkson and Worts' study, a 22-year-old medical student, described how he (or she) experienced space, vision, smell, and temperature:

> At first the painting was just a one-dimensional picture. However, when I began to explore the many facets of the painting as parts and together as a whole, the painting became 3-D reality. I can feel myself moving

and roaming in that wilderness. I can smell and feel the cool waters warmed by the sensational bright orange. It is beautiful and brings back wonderful, soothing, memories. This is a great technique for exploring unknown paintings. (Clarkson and Worts 2005: 268)

Working like texts, audio guides may facilitate museum visitors' experience of paintings by providing a range of information. However, audio guides work in a slightly different way. Looking at paintings and reading textual information require the engagement of vision from museum visitors, though the types of visual involvement are quite distinct. Audio guides, however, require a completely different kind of sensory engagement. Museum visitors may find moving their eyes back and forth between image and printed word difficult because each calls for a different kind of attention. Judging from the experiences referred to above, audio guides may have a powerful impact on museum visitors, especially when those visitors are able to pay attention to paintings. Appealing to a sensory faculty other than our sense of sight, audio guides seem to stimulate responses such as body movement, heat, smell and sound. These are direct and immediate responses, which are different from those produced by reading textual information.

8.3 How do we feel when we see paintings in a museum?

On many occasions, the participants mentioned how they felt during an experience of paintings in a museum. They felt love for the mother country, emptiness, silence, movement, serenity, or quietness. On other occasions, they felt uneasy, unhappy, energetic, disturbed, miserable, abandoned or uncomfortable. Many variations were found

in the feelings evoked by the paintings seen by the participants, as reflected in Mandy's words: '*It awakens not just one kind of feeling, but many kinds*'. Some of the feelings mentioned by participants were connected with the content of the painting. For example, Yoko felt sad when she saw a painting portraying a group of homeless people, and Connie had a sense of tranquility when she saw a painting depicting a quiet scene of rural houses. In other instances, the feelings mentioned by participants were connected to the formal aspect of the painting. For example, some participants mentioned that the intense yellow colour used in Van Gogh's painting produced a sense of vibration.

Some participants' experience of paintings was not one of experiencing a feeling directly associated with content or forms, but an experience in a more general sense. It was the feeling associated with the experience of paintings in a museum as a whole. For example, they experienced being 'in' or inside the painting, being present with the painting, transported to another reality, and navigating between realities. They also experienced a pause in life, being enriched and relieved, being alone, and learning experientially. These feelings can be viewed as a general state of 'being' of the experiencing person. The feelings associated with visual forms of paintings are usually answers to questions such as 'What do you feel when you see the painting?' or 'What feelings do this painting give you?' These are questions usually asked by modernist or expressionist theorists, who assume that paintings make us feel, and who also assume a cause-effect relation between paintings and viewers' feelings. However, this phenomenological study considers museum visitors' experience of paintings as a whole from the vantage point of the experiencing person. The questions that this study asks are 'How do we feel when we see paintings in a museum?' or

'What is it like when we see paintings in a museum?' These questions arise from my experience as an art teacher-educator and a museum docent. It is these kinds of feelings that I am going to discuss in the following sections.

8.3.1 We feel the presence of original paintings.

The participants liked to compare paintings they saw in museums with reproductions, such as posters or illustrations in books, that they had seen previously. Original paintings and reproductions were experienced differently, and participants valued experiencing original paintings more than experiencing reproductions. However, there were also cases in which original paintings and reproductions complemented each other. For some participants, seeing reproductions would sometimes lead to a search for originals in museums.

The museum environment plays an important part in making the difference between seeing originals and reproductions of paintings. Museums are designated as places in which we engage in activities of looking at works of art. We are prepared to settle down, reflect and enjoy paintings there, and this kind of preparation enables us to be more attentive. More importantly, the museum is a place, under normal circumstances, in which we are guaranteed to see originals. As a docent of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, usually the last question that I am asked after a gallery tour is, 'Are all the works here originals?' When I say, 'Yes', my visitors say, 'Wow', and seem to be relieved. The belief that we are seeing original paintings and being with them enhances museum visitors' experience.

Although the experience of original paintings and reproductions is very different, we have far more opportunities to see reproductions. To a large extent, our initial knowledge and experience of paintings usually comes from seeing reproductions. Walter Benjamin argued in his classic essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1955/1973: 223) that original artworks are gradually losing their 'aura' through increased technological reproduction. More recently, Crimp (1993: 58) stated that '[n]otions of originality, authenticity, and presence, essential to the ordered discourse of the museum, are undermined'. However, museums are still places where original paintings are kept and at the same time where they continue to be greatly valued by the general public. In general, the participants still looked forward to experiencing the 'aura' of original paintings, which seems to suggest that 'rumors of the death of the museum are much exaggerated' (Prior 2003: 67).

8.3.1.1 Cherishing the presence of original paintings.

In Connie's descriptions of her experience of paintings, the difference between reproductions and originals was always emphasized. For some participants, the experience of seeing original paintings was usually more profound than that of seeing reproductions. What makes the difference? The comments of the participants suggest that it is the presence of the original painting itself and the museum environment that make the difference. Original paintings offer the experience of actual size, colour, texture, brushwork, details, space and even smell that reproductions cannot offer. The museum setting contributes to the sense of *preciousness*, which is not found with reproductions.

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Connie described the difference between seeing original paintings by Van Gogh and reproductions. When she had seen Van Gogh's paintings in books, she said,

> *... it seemed to me that they were ordinary works and there was nothing special about them. I just saw some exaggerated lines. But when I saw the original painting in the museum, I shook. ... I remember that the painting was yellow in colour. But I've forgotten which painting it was. ... I've forgotten the subject matter of the painting, but the lines and the colour made me feel like ... it should be what I have just said 'it had a life of its own'.*

Connie also described the difference in size:

> *Take Bathing at Asnières [Seurat] as an example. You know reproductions are usually smaller in size ... However, when I'm in the museum seeing the original, I had no idea that the work was so big. I cannot experience the size with a reproduction. Indeed, size does matter. With some paintings, differences in size will give you a totally different feeling.*

Connie pointed out the difference in colour:

> *Printed reproductions are inferior to originals in every way. And the colour is different. Sometimes reproductions will be biased towards certain colours, maybe blue or maybe red. Original works display fine variations in tones or show nice combinations of colours. I can see the subtlety of variations clearly, unlike that printed in reproductions. For instance, I have a faint recollection that the colour of the original is not as blue as this one, it is much gentler.*

Connie mentioned how the original *Bathing at Asnières* showed the brushwork of the painter:

> *... as the work is executed using a pointillist technique, I can see the tiny dots at close range. I can see the minute variations in tone and colour that are made possible by the use of small dots. When I stand close to the painting, I can see the delicate brushwork; when I stand at a distance, I can get an overall impression.*

The physical and material differences between originals and reproductions partly contribute to the differences in museum visitors' experience of paintings. Although a painting is basically seen as a two-dimensional object, we can still feel its presence as an object in space when it is hung on a museum wall. The original painting's presence as a three-dimensional object is different from the flatness of a paper or digital reproduction. Besides experiencing such spatial differences, museum visitors' awareness that they are seeing authentic works in a museum also contributes to the difference between the experience of originals and reproductions. We know that the painting we see is unique. We also feel that the presence of the painting with us, now, in the museum, is unique. The sense of being there with the painting is important; it is similar to the sense of togetherness with a person whom we know. The presence of the painting and the bodily presence of the viewer in the same space create a sense of 'eye-witness' historicity that is not possible when viewers look at a reproduction in a bookshop or at home. A sense of being with something valuable, something unique, is a prominent aspect of a museum visitor's experience of paintings. Berger (1972) describes such a presence as 'closing the distance in time':

> Original paintings are silent and still in a sense that information never is. Even a reproduction hung on a wall is not comparable in this respect for in the original the silence and stillness permeate the actual material, the paint, in which one follows the traces of the painter's immediate gestures. This has the effect of closing the distance in time between the painting of the picture and one's own act of looking at it. In this special sense all paintings are contemporary. Hence the immediacy of their testimony. (Berger 1972: 31)

8.3.1.2 Fulfilling the expectation of seeing original paintings.

The participants expected to see originals in museums, and for some this was an experience

they had looked forward to for years. Although there is a marked difference between experiencing original paintings and reproductions, the two kinds of experience sometimes complement each other. Each plays its own role in attracting viewers to museums. Seeing reproductions first may subsequently lead viewers to look for the originals. However, there are instances when people feel disappointed when they see originals in museums, and they may say, for example, 'I think the postcard is better than the painting' (Henry 2000: 38).

Linda described how she was impressed by a poster reproduction of Monet's painting and then began to develop an interest in his works:

> *There is a bookshop on the campus where I saw a poster reproduction of Monet's work. The bookshop is quite big. ... I remember seeing a painting by Monet when I raised my head. It is a big poster and the painting is very beautiful. ... I saw it there for the first time and after that I began to pay special attention to paintings by Monet.*

Marjorie Sheen (2001), a communication professional who visits museums regularly, wrote about her museum experience as a mature visitor. She described how her reading about Van Gogh's paintings increased her anticipation of seeing the paintings in a museum:

> The recent Van Gogh exhibition at the National Gallery of Art was a prized opportunity to see paintings that ... I would not likely see again. ... As I ... saw reproductions of his works, I looked forward with keen anticipation to a careful viewing of paintings that marked major stages and events in Van Gogh's life. (Sheen 2001: 23)

The participants articulated the difference between seeing an original and seeing a reproduction and they also appeared to cherish the experience of seeing originals more than that of seeing reproductions. These experiences were connected and sometimes one

would lead to the other. Participants remembered seeing the reproduction when they saw the original painting in the museum. There were also cases in which participants remembered the original when they were seeing reproductions. These connections constantly renewed the participants' experience of paintings in a museum. Of course, we have more opportunities to see reproductions than original paintings; however, it seems that museum visitors' experience of paintings has not been diminished by their experience of reproductions. Rather, we may refer to our memories of seeing reproductions when we come to see original paintings. Relating original paintings and reproductions to each other enhances museum visitors' experience of paintings.

8.3.1.3 Seeing a 'life' in original paintings.

Participants believed that original paintings have a life of their own. In fact, some participants said that the subject matter that was depicted in the painting became so real that it seemed to be alive. Some mentioned that original paintings had a vitality that reproductions did not have. However, the participants could not really articulate exactly what they meant by 'life'.

Connie described her experience of seeing Van Gogh's painting *The Siesta (after Millet)*:

> *Van Gogh's paintings give me a feeling of life. But when I see his paintings in books, this feeling is not so strong. When I see them in museums, I can feel it. ... The major difference is that sometimes you see the brush strokes, the richness of the colour ... adding up all these, it gives you an impression of life. What is painted can be so real. The scenery can be so beautiful. But if you see reproductions, you may not see this, oil paintings in particular. ... Compared to what I see in books, I think that the painting has a life. It has got a life. It is not a dull reproduction.*

By 'life of its own', Connie might mean that she could sense the presence of the painter in his characteristic signature of brushwork, his use of colour or his ways of using lines and shapes. By seeing the painting close up, she actually felt the work of the painter's hand. She could trace the work and craftsmanship of the painter. The sense that the painter had actually touched or worked on the canvas was an important part of the experience. However, when she went on to describe her experience in more detail, what she called the 'life' of an original painting seems to refer to Van Gogh's unique painting method. Connie meant that the visual effect of the colours and brushwork was so vivid that the painting seemed to have its own life.

Linda also mentioned feeling 'a life' in Monet's painting. She commented that the painting

> *is not a dead object. There is life in the painting. It is not a chair. It is not a desk. ... What is most important is the presence of sunlight. Sunlight has given out a feeling of life. ... No matter how good a print is, it cannot bring out such an effect. For one reason, it's only a reproduction. ... I no longer see the painting as a flat surface or a dead object.*

For Linda, the painting had a 'life of its own' because it had the ability to show what she believes is its essence. Linda emphasized the point that the painting was not a dead object. With natural light on it, the painting glowed by itself. The painting manifested the best part of itself – its colour. Both Connie and Linda described paintings as charged with energy. The paintings had been executed in ways that were so lively and energetic that they described them as having a life of their own. When we say that something has a life, we may mean that something is unique and has its own character. Both Connie and Linda

were acknowledging the uniqueness of the paintings. When we say that something has a life, we may also mean that it is something that we can talk to and communicate with and something that can respond. The participants felt that seeing original paintings was like seeing people in person and that, like people, each painting has a life of its own. They felt that they could communicate and interact with the original, but not with a reproduction. They felt they could relate to the painting in a direct and personal way.

8.3.2 We feel like sharing our experience with others.

Participants mentioned visiting the museum with relatives or friends. Some participants said that having companions would mean having people to talk to and share the experience with. More thoughts about the painting came to the participants when they shared their experience with others. Connie liked to study paintings in a leisurely and unhurried manner. Going with someone else would provide her with opportunities to talk about the paintings. Connie said that sometimes it would be good

> *to have company to see paintings together. ... We can discuss the quality of the paintings. Once I went to an exhibition with a friend and we stayed at the museum until closing time ... We enjoyed it very much. We talked about the paintings. I don't know the life histories of artists. We talked about the particular areas where the artists excelled or about their special painting techniques. We had conversations and I felt happy about that.*

Louise (Montgomery-Whicher 1987) described her experience of visiting a Renoir exhibition with her sister:

> I was with my sister and we like to discuss it as we see things ... to share it right away ... [my sister] really enjoyed it as well ... I think that maybe I notice things a little bit more because she likes to have me point things out: "oh, did you notice this?" (Montgomery-Whicher 1987: 116)

When Connie visited a museum with a friend, they shared background knowledge about the painter and how they felt about the painting. Such sharing helped Connie understand the painting better. She also felt happy to have someone to talk to. Louise enjoyed visiting museums with her sister and in particular liked it when they discussed paintings together. By pointing things out to each other, Louise and her sister noticed more about the paintings. Apparently, there were some parts of the experience of paintings that Connie and Louise liked to share with others. But to what extent can our experience of paintings be shared? Which aspects can be shared and which aspects cannot be shared? From Connie's experience, it seems it is easier for people to talk about the life history of artists, techniques and styles, which are, to a large extent, either facts, or the visual qualities of paintings.

8.3.3 We feel alone, in spite of the presence of our companions and other museum visitors.

Some participants talked about their experience seldom mentioning seeing the paintings or sharing the experience with others. For some participants, even when they went to the museum with friends or family, their experience was a solitary experience. They felt that they were alone seeing the painting. At various points in their reflections about their experience, some participants said that they almost completely forgot other people when they were highly attentive to the painting. Yoko said that,

I am all by myself in the museum seeing the painting and recalling memories without anybody around. Perhaps I am too attentive to the painting. Actually there are some people nearby, but when I really focus on the painting, they no longer exist. When I'm concentrating on my thoughts, it doesn't matter whether other museum visitors exist or not. ... When I'm with the painting, I feel that I'm alone. ... It seems that I have entered the lonely and mysterious world created by the painting on my own. There is nobody

beside me.

Yoko insisted that she was alone seeing the painting even though there were many people nearby. She did not feel the existence of others. But she felt the existence of herself. She was *alone*, by herself *with* the painting in the museum. One of Montgomery-Whicher's respondents suggests similar feelings of being alone in a museum: 'the many people who walked around the same hall as we did never seemed to be there at all ... [everyone] got absorbed and forgot about each other's presence' and 'I was alone in this over-crowded room' (1987: 117).

In the above cases, the existence of others in the museum is experienced as a type of non-existence. In spite of the other people in the museum, visitors can feel that they are *alone with* a painting. It seems easier for people to focus and attend when they are alone.

8.3.4 We feel a pause in our daily lives.

Experiencing paintings in a museum may mean experiencing a pause in our lives. Referring to *They're Growing Up,* Mandy recalled vividly how she felt mixed up with the past and the present:

Relating the past to the present, I have to think twice before spending. My parents have to work hard to earn a living. I mix myself with the past and the present. ... Memories of the past intertwined with what is happening just outside here. While I was in the lobby, I do not only think about the painting or my childhood episodes but also things that are happening now. It does not happen in one direction.

Mandy stopped in the midst of her very busy schedule and had a momentary respite in which she was able to look back into the past as well as forward into the future. This pause not only allowed her the time, but also the space to travel back and forth in time, as reflected in her saying:

> *It has many associations with my past, makes me think of the present, and relate the two with reference to my lifestyles and to memories of childhood. A lot of things, indeed.*

Mandy said that the best thing about the experience of the painting is that

> *it makes me think about my life as a child. All of a sudden, through the painting, I recall many things that happened when I was young. It is an advantage to me to reflect on the past. ... This painting causes me to think about the past, but other paintings may make me think about the present world, people of different social status, or the environment.*

Yoko also said that the painting *The Homeless* made her

> *stop and think for a long time. It has the power to impress me. This painting is attractive because it makes me think.*

For Irene, there was an opportunity to stand back and look at her life when she looked at paintings:

> *In my daily life, I have to deal with many people and matters, day in and day out ... I practise meditation but sometimes I still forget there is a spiritual element in everyday life. Sometimes I get so much into daily life that I forget to stand back and ... think about it. ... What does life mean for me? Sometimes I forget and when I look at those paintings, they just remind me.*

The experience of paintings may sometimes drive us to think, as we begin to walk slowly through the museum, as reflected in a conversation with a museum visitor: 'I really feel

tired – must be because I'm using my brain.' (Henry 2000: 71) Ken also said, '*I like to see paintings that have something to tell and that I have to think about*'. The following description by Belting (2002) illustrates the point that museums are designed as a special place where people can reflect and remember:

> Museums ... were chosen to rescue from the fast tempo of progress that which would have been irretrievably sacrificed to the idol of the constantly new. They were tacitly withdrawn from the race, from the increasing acceleration of time. Museums and their activities were intended to compensate for the constant self-abolition of modern ideas, products, and media. They came into being as places of stored time where the collective memory lies. (Belting 2002: 77)

To Mandy, Yoko, and Irene, experiencing a pause in a museum was to gain some space and time for reflection. Such a pause does not literally mean that time, or our bodies, have suddenly come to a halt. Rather, it means that our bodies and minds are being engaged in various kinds of reflection, relating paintings to our previous experiences, to the painter, to a related text, to other paintings, and to our philosophy of life. *A slice of time is being bracketed during which the painting virtually becomes a space for reflection.* Getting into a reflective mood is not something we do normally. However, when we are looking at old photos, reading a book, talking to a childhood classmate or doing an assignment about our family history, we are more likely to become reflective. We need time and space in order to engage in these activities.

By inviting visitors to slow down, the museum environment and the paintings there offer such a space and time for people to embark on a journey of reflection, in particular on issues related to life – the existence of life and the meaning of life. Such reflection may help us better understand ourselves, enhancing our self-knowledge and self-recognition

(Costantino 2003). In this sense, looking at paintings in a museum is somewhat like looking in a mirror. Inevitably, such an experience drives us to encounter and examine ourselves. We may recall the experience of walking along a corridor and suddenly seeing a mirror hanging on the wall. We stop and look in the mirror to see how we look.

8.3.5 We feel transported, drawn into the picture.

It is understandable that the participants mentioned what they saw in the paintings: for example, a house, a mountain or a person. Some participants, however, said that they were actually *in* the environment depicted by the painting. It has been mentioned earlier that participants made associations with things not found in the paintings. The painting was in a way drawing the viewer out of the painting, or drawing the viewer away from the painting to something which was, nonetheless, related to it. However, participants also described their experience of paintings in a museum as one of being drawn into the painting.

For instance, referring to *Bathing at Asnières* by Seurat, Connie said:

> *When I see this painting, I feel myself being inside the painting ... I feel the heat. ... I feel that I am in that environment ... feeling hot ... I have been to Repulse Bay [a famous beach in Hong Kong] during summer. When it is really hot, everything becomes misty. I am particular amazed by the hazy atmosphere of the painting. It makes me feel like I'm inside the painting. ... It means that you are inside the scene. It seems that you see the people. ... perhaps the technique is so good or you have a lot of feelings ... I'm not sure ...*

Irene talked about how Cézanne's *L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny* drew her into a forested world:

> *Not so many painters can capture the spirit of what they paint in their paintings. In that painting, I think Cézanne did it. I think that there are some strokes which don't really*

belong to the trees, which don't really belong to the environment. I think that a few strokes captured the spirit. Yes. I feel that ... I am being drawn into the painting. ... It is alive. So it draws you in. I don't know how. [laugh] ... You feel that ... you're there. ... You wish you were there in the painting. It's like ... you know ... [pause] it draws you in ... [pause] ... At that moment, you feel like communicating with the trees. It makes me feel that I'm walking in the forest or I'm among the trees ...

Both *Bathing at Asnières* and *L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny* are not at all photo-realistic paintings. So it was not the highly realistic style or technique that created a fictitious world which drew the participants into the painting. However, Connie felt the heat and haze of the environment depicted in the painting and she felt she was there. She also said that it might be the technique of the painter that drew her into the painting. Irene seemed more philosophical, and said that the painting captured the essence or spirit of the trees and it was that that drew her into the painting. In their study of visitors' responses to J. E. H. MacDonald's *The Beaver Dam,* Clarkson and Worts call such an invitation to go into the painting 'the merging effect' (2005: 269). One respondent of Clarkson and Worts' study, a 42-year-old educator, remarked on his experience with similar undertones: 'I have learned to hold the moment – enter into it – and to be with it. The distance between myself and the (art) painting is no longer' (Clarkson and Worts 2005: 269).

For Yoko, this experience of paintings was one where she found herself transported to the new reality created by the painting *The Homeless*. Her experience was that

there are two worlds. I enjoy looking at the painting if this happens only occasionally. ... Even if the painting makes me feel uncomfortable, it doesn't matter because it's not reality. ... Perhaps in reality I don't have the chance to be in situations that make me feel uncomfortable, and it is interesting to experience such a feeling occasionally. It's the feeling of being transported into the uncomfortable situation that

makes the experience interesting. It feels like acting a role in a play. I can try a lot of different things. I can try what doesn't happen in the real world. The difference is that when I'm looking at paintings, I can always go back to my normal life.

To Yoko, looking at a painting was like being transported to another world. She said, '*It is after the experience that I have a feeling that I have fallen into a world created by the painting. I am not conscious of such a feeling when I'm looking at the painting*'. This experience is closely connected to the theme of 'being drawn into the painting'. However, the feeling of being transported was more about navigating between two realities: the one created by the painting and the one that was the real world. It seems that Yoko could experience being in a variety of situations vicariously without being affected in her real life. To Yoko, experiencing painting becomes a safe way to explore potentially painful, risky experience. I would suggest that this experience of being transported between realities is not a kind of escape from or evasion of real life. Rather, museum visitors are more aware of the situatedness of themselves so that they experience a feeling of being transported. It is only when we are aware of where we are situated that we have a feeling of being transported to other places. Experiencing paintings in a museum allows people to face themselves and to have a more acute feeling of being in the world. I would suggest that, far from losing oneself to the painting, we are actually reminded of our own existence.

Being drawn into something implies that we are wholly involved with the object that we are seeing. Rather than seeing this as a total absorption of oneself into the painting and as losing one's consciousness, as is typical of many studies of aesthetic experience, I would describe such a phenomenon as a finding of ourselves in the painting, a heightening of

awareness of ourselves and a recognizing of ourselves being in the world. In our daily lives, we are so preoccupied with the world that we often forget ourselves. Perricone (2003: 28) writes, 'Typically, we tend to lose our selves, our bodies in day-to-day experiences. The experiencing subject loses sight of himself or herself in favor of its subjects. What art does is to bring to the front of consciousness the fact that the body is the vehicle of one's presence to things.' Therefore, when we see a painting, we recover from the 'normal' state of forgetting ourselves. We become more aware of ourselves, of our bodies, here with the painting. When Connie said, '*You feel that ... you are ... you are there. You can actually feel ... you wish to be there in the painting*', by '*you*' she meant '*I*'. It is a kind of acknowledgement of one's existence.

Ooka Makoto (1995), a prolific Japanese poet, described his first experience in a museum seeing paintings:

– To Art Museums –
The first time
I visited an art museum
I remember
how I held my breath
and stole from room to room

Paintings stood
shoulder to shoulder
covered the walls
some fixed their gazes on me
made me shiver
made me drunk

That sign of scrutiny
from another world

filled the gap
between the painting and me
with the speed of light
In a twinkling
I flew a thousand leagues
a walker in trance

Then I realized:
To see is
to be seen

The first time
I visited an art museum
(Makoto 1995: 81)

Instead of feeling that he was scrutinizing the paintings in the museum, Makoto felt that he was being scrutinized, being 'seen' by the paintings. Feeling that we are 'seen' is another instance when we are aware of our presence. And, as Makoto suggests, this may be an uncomfortable sensation. In our normal lives, we see things, but we seldom feel 'seen'[4]. While looking at paintings in a museum, we may be aware of our presence and our own bodies.

8.3.6 We feel uplifted, enriched and relieved.

Going to art museums to see paintings not only provided participants in this study with space and time for reflection, but such reflection would usually lead to a feeling of having

[4] Sartre (1943/1995) describes the experience of being 'seen' in an anecdote about a man who immediately feels ashamed when he hears footsteps in the hallway and realizes that he is being looked at while he is spying through a keyhole.

improved or advanced in some way. When Mandy reflected on her experience of the painting *They're Growing Up*, she said:

> *I don't have the time and the chance to look back at what I have done. ... It is a precious chance to reflect on how you have lived and what you have experienced. I enrich myself. I come to an awareness that I am at a higher level. My life becomes more colourful and more three-dimensional. Layers and layers of colour accumulate on top of each other and I feel richer than before. I am not so shallow. We are so busy and we do not understand ourselves. Reflecting on how we have lived and what we have done, we see the world in a different way.*

A visitor's account of an experience of the painting *Millennial Brink 1999* by Janette Sedgebeer at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery expressed the same theme of enrichment:

> Because I feel like I'm a working, functioning human being, even though I don't like a lot of what's downstairs, I will have learned something, it will have enriched my life in some way and I'll have used my brain more this afternoon than I did yesterday, for instance. ... I think you spend most of your life living from one day to the next, thinking about bills, thinking about going to work, driving up and down the motorway or something, you go to an art gallery and you are living and experiencing art ... it's challenging and it's what keeps the human race evolving ...
>
> (A respondent's comments in a study on interpretative strategies at an art gallery, in Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2001: 13-14)

Mandy, like the museum visitor quoted above, said that she was enriched by the painting. Mandy had a feeling of expansion. She was aware that her life was not so shallow after all; it did not consist only of the present, but was made up of many layers of experience which gave it a certain *depth*. Her life had somehow been expanded. The experience of the painting in the museum made Mandy think about life. She saw her life as if from above, a new *horizon* where she got a clearer vision of life. She thought about life in a more philosophical manner. In a similar way to Mandy, the gallery visitor stopped thinking about mundane activities and engaged in more reflections about life in general.

Irene expressed the feeling of having been uplifted when she

> *walked through all those paintings. I just admire them. I feel that my spirit has been lifted. ... I feel very comfortable with those paintings. A painting is flat and it is limited, but if there is space, I can imagine that all the abstract space becomes unlimited. So ... they give you some space. ... I think, mental space ... so that you can actually ... create a space between yourself and daily life and have reflections. ... And then, I walked through those paintings. I just feel very comfortable and my spirit is transformed, or lifted to another level. ...*

Feeling uplifted or enriched is closely related to the theme of 'experiencing a pause'. Engaging in reflection gives us a feeling of satisfaction. 'To reflect is to pause and think; to process what has gone before' (Maykut and Morehouse 1994: 25). It seems that, while we reflect on our past, we understand our present situation better and gain insights into our future. It would be difficult to pin down exactly what the words 'enriched' and 'uplifted' mean, but they imply that we are somehow improved or 'expanded', perhaps obtaining a better understanding of ourselves, the world around us or human existence. Louise, a respondent in Montgomery-Whicher's study, describes her feeling about Renoir's paintings at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as 'a real feeling of well-being' (1987: 94):

> **It's only happened a few times that I can remember feeling that way. It's ... like a light in the back of my head that I feel ... it gives me a real feeling of well-being when I see these things. Of course, it's temporary; but at the time it makes me feel very, very happy, you know that kind of happiness you get when you see a great painting? (Montgomery-Whicher 1987: 94)**

Being uplifted also involves a sense of a change of space. This can only be sensed through one's body. When Irene mentioned that her spirit had been lifted, this was an analogy, but it assumes a bodily sense that if we stand in a higher place, we will be able to see more things and we will be able to see the whole picture.

Irene experienced a sense of relief when she saw one of Kandinsky's paintings:

> *... in the Courtauld Gallery ... you have Impressionists first, Manet and Monet and all these; it gradually moves to the more modern ones: Kandinsky and the others at the end. ... I've been there many times. I appreciate them. ... This time something stuck ... in me or I don't know, maybe I got stuck. ... When I walked towards the end, I saw that painting ... It takes ... all of a sudden ... it's like ... it takes away everything in me. I feel so relieved. It has a healing effect on me at that moment. It's just ... feeling very well ... it's wonderful ...*

Dora, the main character in Iris Murdoch's novel *The Bell*, also experienced a sense of relief when she visited the National Gallery and saw Gainsborough's paintings:

> Dora was always moved by the pictures. Today she was moved, but in a new way. ... It occurred to her that here at last was something real and something perfect. Who had said that, about perfection and reality being in the same place? ... But the pictures were something real outside herself, which spoke to her kindly and yet in sovereign tones, something superior and good whose presence destroyed the dreary trance-like solipsism of her earlier mood. ... Yet she felt that she had had a revelation. She looked at the radiant, sombre, tender, powerful canvas of Gainsborough and felt a sudden desire to go down on her knees before it, embracing it, shedding tears. (Murdoch 1958: 190-191)

Irene and Dora's experiencing of relief is related to *catharsis*, an aesthetic concept of Greek philosophy. Catharsis is a feeling of being taken away or purified (Halliwell 1992) when we see great works of art. Dora found both reality and perfection in paintings, and with this discovery, or revelation, she recovered from her 'trance-like' mood. For Irene, experiencing the painting was like putting down all the burdens, worries and desires which she had been carrying around in her daily life. It is such a letting go of things that typifies her experience.

were displayed, in relation to their experience of paintings. To them, the experience of being in a museum formed an integral part of their experience of paintings.

Irene described how her experience of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* was affected by the museum setting:

> *I visited the Courtauld Gallery more than five times within a period of two years. The gallery displays the same paintings in different ways. I think that it has an influence as well. One example is ... Manet's painting ... it's of a bar lady standing in front of a mirror. ... I remember that the room is arranged in such a way that there's a huge space in the middle ... Because of such a big space ... the arrangement really helps to show the scale of that painting. It really reflects the atmosphere that has been reflected in the mirror. It is ... the space that I'm in. It actually brings me into the context of the painting. However, this kind of feeling disappeared when I visited there the next time. The setting has been rearranged and the room has been divided into smaller areas. Though the painting is still there, the feeling that I had the last time has gone. ... The feeling of the grand scale of the painting has vanished.*

On another occasion, Irene talked about how paintings fitted into the museum environment:

> *I went to the Vatican Museums ... There were a lot of religious paintings on the walls, on the ceilings and everywhere. And it was the first time that I was able to communicate with those paintings. ... They are so big ... not only on the four walls, but also the ceiling ...not only in one room, but in many rooms. So it was an overwhelming experience for me. ... They are so ... lively. They have their own life and the paintings are in the right place, where they should be.*

Although in both these cases, the museum environment had an influence on Irene's experience of the paintings, there was a difference in how the environment worked. In her first few visits to the Courtauld Gallery, the environment echoed the space being portrayed in the painting. Irene imagined that the space of the museum was an extension of the

space reflected in the mirror of the painting: like a continuation of the visual effect of the painting. At the Vatican Museums, it was the nature or the meaning of the environment that made the difference. Having been a church or chapel in the past, the museum environment became the perfect place to see those religious paintings in their original setting. The paintings and the environment were connected through the meaningful context that they both shared.

Linda mentioned that the play of sunlight inside the museum meant a lot to her understanding of the paintings by Monet. She said:

> *When I walk into one room, I see the painting. ... What is most impressive is that the room is lit by natural light. Obviously, I feel the presence of natural light and the ways that the light harmonizes with the painting. ... I only remember that the several paintings inside the room are not Monet's famous paintings that we often find in posters. But I still find them very good with the play of sunlight. They are much better than reproductions that I see in books or on websites.*

Marjorie Sheen (2001), a regular museum-goer, talked about how the spatial arrangement of paintings affected her experience:

> The positioning of the artist's last work, *Wheatfield with Crows*, done just days before his suicide, offers the most egregious example. ... This masterpiece needs to be hung with appropriate regard for space and setting, so that viewers can fully appreciate its significance. But its placement prevented this and, in the process, demeaned the power of this final work. (Sheen 2001: 23)

Megan, a historian by training and an undergraduate advisor, wrote about her experience of visiting an art museum, in Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson's study of museum visitors' experience:

> The entrance is now up a ramp beside a large reflecting pool to double burnished copper doors. It is very

> understated and lovely. One enters into a small two story rotunda, with daylight pouring down through the skylights. The rotunda is Shaker simplicity itself, with a waxed colored stone floor and a single bench along the wall, thus the light plays an important role in setting the aesthetic ambiance ... (Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson 2002: 114)

For Linda, Marjorie and Megan, the experience of space and setting was instrumental in bringing out the best, or the 'power', of the paintings and in creating an 'atmosphere' for looking at paintings.

The physical setting of a museum environment frames the experience of viewers. Museums are believed to be places that have been purpose-built to house paintings. The space, the lighting, the flow of the rooms, the traffic of visitors, the mounting of objects, the presentation of labels, the colour of the walls, and even the sounds, the seating and clothing of guards, temperature and smells are all calculated by the museum staff, in the hope of bringing out the best in the paintings being displayed. More importantly, museums are seen as places where valuable cultural objects are placed. While a church is the sacred house of God, a museum can be seen as the sacred house of a culture. What people feel and do inside a museum is not unlike what people feel and do inside a church (Duncan 1995). Moreover, people in a museum are expected to behave in a certain way. They have to be quiet, show respect for what is on display, contemplate the exhibits and appreciate objects.

The participants in this study experienced paintings in relation to the museum environment. It was the combination of their experience of the paintings and their experience of the museum that constituted the complete experience. Every participant's experience of

paintings was also a site-specific experience.

8.4.2 Experiencing the museum space as an enacting space.

Some participants preferred a quiet, spacious and uncrowded environment. They needed to concentrate undisturbed. Too many people, or devices such as glass panes prevented them from seeing the painting clearly and from having an interest in seeing any more. For example, Connie talked about seeing *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre Museum:

> *Mona Lisa looks much dimmer when I see it in the museum. It is so small ... covered by a glass pane, guarded by an old man sitting next to it, and blocked ... with many people. Museums abroad are spacious. There are usually not too many people standing in front of one painting. People have a lot of space to move around. But with the Mona Lisa, there are so many people standing near it ... makes it difficult to see. A lot of people gather round ... I think that the environment affects much of my experience of paintings.*

Connie described the kind of museum environment that helped her see. Connie said:

> *I can do nothing in a museum if it is too noisy or crowded. The environment has to be quiet, comfortable, but not too quiet, not a deadly silence ... it depends on which type of painting I'm seeing. To quote an example, a little bit of background music, I mean music played on a guzheng [a Chinese stringed instrument] can bring on a relaxed mood, especially when you're looking at Chinese paintings. ... If the gallery is noisy and packed with people ... you know some major exhibitions, such as the Hong Kong Museum of Art featuring works of great masters ... there are so many people, I don't have the inclination to walk around.*

Reflecting on her museum experience, Marjorie Sheen (2001) said:

> When I'm home in Washington, D. C., a month seldom goes by without at least one visit to the National Gallery of Art, a museum I have gotten to know intimately in the past 25 years. ... And I sometimes go just to be there, to spend time within its walls. Its expansive dimensions and quiet create an atmosphere

> others might associate with a church or temple. For me, the best museums offer a refuge from today's frenetic pace and noisy distractions, an oasis that fosters the contemplation and meditation that, with age, I increasingly value. (Sheen 2001: 22)

Megan compared her experience of paintings in a museum to the experience of solitude in the wilderness:

> One painting, in particular, "Still" by Thomas Shields with the salt marsh in the foreground ... Realistic in a lithographic sense, not a photographic sense. When I am at the top of a mountain, or at the edge of the sea or a lake in the wilderness, my mind empties out all of the urban images, chaos, and deadlines into the view. They don't necessarily disappear, but they become faint memories ... (Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson 2002: 124)

For Connie, Marjorie and Megan, the museum environment is important in the sense that it creates a space for them to see paintings in an undisturbed, thoughtful atmosphere. The experience of quietness in a museum produces a silence so complete that sometimes we can hear our own breathing. It appears that the quietness of the environment allows people to 'listen' to what the paintings have to say, as Irene mentioned many times when she said that museum paintings sometimes '*talk*' to her. Competing information is moved away so as to minimize distraction. Not only is the noise of the environment eliminated, but also the 'noise' of our public life is shut off in a museum. As soon as we walk inside the gallery, particularly in a modern art gallery, we feel the difference, accurately reflected by the term 'White Cube' (O'Doherty 1986).

The museum environment is quiet and clean. Space is intentionally created, in a physical and mental sense, to facilitate the transition of the viewer from one reality to another. But does such an environment actually help viewers experience paintings by providing a quiet,

undisturbed place in the midst of their busy lives? Or could such an environment actually threaten viewers, in the sense that it creates a cold, unfriendly atmosphere? I suggest that either of these things may happen, depending on how well a viewer is inducted into the museum setting culturally, socially and educationally. Museums have taken on the role of offering a transitory space where people can experience the self with the painting. We are left alone in a museum, but we are with the paintings. Silverstone (1994) calls the space created by the museum 'a potential space'. He says:

> This potential space, which surrounds and contains any act of communication, is an essential part of the museum's communication. The objects that are displayed within it gain their meaning and their power both from their significance as items in a collection and their claims for authenticity, but also from the imaginative work that visitors can and must do in relation to them. Their aura and their magic, the aura and magic of the exhibition or museum as a whole, are products of the joint work undertaken in this potential space. (Silverstone 1994: 173)

The museum is not only a physical space in which visitors can look at paintings, but, phenomenologically speaking, it is also a mental space in which to think, to reflect and to rest. The mental space created by the museum is a necessary and valued space for visitors to step aside from their busy lives. Visitors are encouraged to enter the reflective mood of the space created jointly by the museum and the paintings.

8.5 Concluding remarks

An examination of the descriptions of experiences of paintings in a museum provided by adult non-art specialists reveals a number of themes. Van Manen (1997) differentiates

between two kinds of themes: incidental themes and universal themes. Incidental themes describe certain aspects of the phenomenon under study, but which are not necessarily true for all instances of the phenomenon. Universal themes are themes describing certain aspects of the phenomenon 'without which the phenomenon could not be what it is' (van Manen 1997:107). Instead of using the term 'universal', I would rather describe these themes as 'structural': that is, as revealing some of the basic structures of museum visitors' experience of paintings. They provide insights that enable us to understand what it is like for adult non-art specialists to experience paintings in a museum.

On one hand, some of the themes are incidental, and they tell us about the experience of museum visitors in a specific sense. For example, only some of the participants had the feeling of being drawn into a painting, although more than one of the participants mentioned such a feeling. On the other hand, some of the themes tell us more about the underlying structure of the experience: for example, the relating of a painting to personal experience. Actually, it is impossible to look at paintings in a museum without relating them to any of our past experiences.

Through vision and embodied involvement, people experientially immerse themselves in the visual aspect of paintings in a museum. By visual aspect, I mean the seeing, thinking and interpretation of the formal elements manifested in paintings. People make sense of paintings in a museum from what they *see* in the paintings. This meaning-making process will sometimes result in a narrative form that makes sense to the viewers since it relates to the viewers' personal experience, knowledge, visual images and to the textual information

available. Another important aspect of experiencing paintings in a museum is experiencing the museum space and the cultural and social connotations of the museum. The sense of space refers not only to the physical environment but also to the mental space in which the viewer experiences a pause in life and begins to engage in deep reflection. In this way, museums become public spaces where visitors are able to create their own private space. Reflections on matters related to life will heighten the visitor's awareness of his or her situatedness and being. Such engagement and awareness will sometimes bring a sense of well-being to the viewer.

The themes in this chapter have been developed from a thematic analysis of that which the participants were able to articulate during their reflections. There were, however, some aspects that participants could not articulate or which they had difficulties in expressing, describing or talking about. I will deal with these aspects in chapter nine.

Chapter Nine:

Aspects of the Lived Experience of Paintings that Museum Visitors Cannot Articulate

9.1 Introduction

Phenomenologists look for presence and absence, parts and wholes, and particulars and generals in a phenomenon. Similarly, I believe that something unsaid is as important as something said. I have therefore looked at that which the participants in this study were able to articulate in describing their experience of paintings, as well as that which they were unable to articulate. This is evident in the practice of paintings as well: what is painted and what is not painted may be equally important. In traditional Chinese paintings, what is not painted, or the 'blank' area, assumes 'significance beyond the painted scene' (Guo[1] in Li 1981/1988: 216). Such blank areas communicate something that cannot be communicated through visual forms and allow the viewer tremendous possibilities in personal interpretation. Grondin (1998), in discussing Gadamer's ideas of art and the experience of art, also notes that:

> When confronted with a work of art, something strikes us, invites us to rethink, rediscover our experience, yet we cannot translate its "proposition" in another language. (Grondin 1998: 270)

[1] Born during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 A.D.), Guo Xi (c.1020 – c.1090) was a court offical as well as a renowned painter who specialized in landscape painting. He was the author of the book *Linquan Gaozhi* (*Lofty Record of Forests and Streams*), a collection of Guo's views on the techniques and purposes of Chinese landscape paintings.

All the participants are adults educated up to secondary level and none of them has verbal communication difficulties. I did not know most of the participants before the interviews, but soon after we had started to talk, we were engaging in fluent dialogue. For most of the time, they were able to respond using gestures and eye contact, to express themselves and reflect on their experience. However, most participants experienced difficulties in expressing themselves at some point. Phrases like '*it's difficult to tell*', '*how to say it*', '*I don't know how to describe it*', '*no, no ... it's difficult to say it exactly*' occasionally emerged. At other times, silences or pauses occurred when they talked about certain aspects of their experience. The prevalence of these sporadic points of inarticulateness or inexpressiveness during interviews interests me. In my own experience, this is quite different from when engaging people in talking about a film or a book. People are more fluent and straightforward in describing their experience of films or books. We express our likes and dislikes, sometimes with excitement and humour, and we talk incessantly, especially around a pub table. When we come to the experience of paintings, however, it seems to be a private experience. Opportunities for us to share our experience of paintings are not as frequent as opportunities to talk about a film or a book. I am not the first to detect such inarticulateness in describing the experience of paintings or works of art. Sutton (2003), Maclagan (2001), Abbs (1994), Funch (1997), Weltzl-Fairchild (1991), Moncrieff (1989) and Hargreaves (1983) have all made the same observation.

Such inarticulateness about an experience of paintings may emerge from an untranslatable quality of the experience itself, the limitations of language, the ignorance of the participants, the awkwardness of the interview situation, the fading of memory, the quality of engaging

in reflections or the refusal of participants to talk about it. In this chapter, I will discuss the non-articulated aspects of museum visitors' experience of paintings by focusing on two questions. What does it mean when museum visitors experience a certain kind of inarticulateness when they talk about their experience of paintings? In what ways does such inarticulateness help me better understand the experience?

Forms of inarticulateness could imply that some dimensions of the experience of paintings cannot be adequately revealed through language. However, these implicit, unclear or tacit dimensions seem to be an integral part of the experience. I suggest that we can approach the non-articulated dimensions from two points of view. The first involves the structure of the experience. That is, in museum visitors' experience of paintings, inarticulateness is inherent in the experience. The second involves the structure of language. That is, in using language to describe our experience, we can never express a full version of the experience. I will explore these two dimensions further in the following sections.

9.2 We are lost in describing our feelings.

A recurring theme that appeared during most of the interviews was that participants had difficulties in fully expressing their feelings. Although they could describe their own feelings about the paintings, by giving a series of adjectives, and sometimes by offering elaborations, they still found their descriptions unsatisfactory. Some participants wanted

to explain why they had such a feeling, but they simply did not know how to do so.

9.2.1 We do not know how to describe our feelings.

When talking about their experience of paintings in a museum, the participants said that they had certain feelings but they did not know how to describe them. They searched for and found some words, but it seemed that there was still a certain quality of the feeling not yet articulated.

Yoko was not able to pin down her feeling exactly. She was caught between feelings and words:

> *I have a lot of questions in mind. The feeling is immediate but it's difficult to tell exactly what it is. How to say it? I feel peaceful, comfortable, warm, smooth ... I really feel this way.*

Ken had difficulties in articulating how he felt. He was simply not clear about his feeling:

> *I don't know how to describe the way I feel. The sphere is composed of many layers and it makes me think of plants like onion and lettuce. Considering the title of the painting, I think that it has successfully created the feeling of 'breaking through'.*

Ken's situation was different from Yoko's. He could not grasp the way he felt. This means that he had a feeling but that he could not identify what that feeling was. Judging from the experience of Yoko and Ken, it seems that there was a certain inadequacy of language that meant the participants could not express themselves fully. In an experience of paintings in a museum, there seems to be something that is beyond the capacity of

language to express or to capture.

9.2.2 We find it difficult to describe exactly what it is like to experience paintings.

Participants had difficulties in elaborating on their experience. Sometimes they mentioned terms or phrases like '*resonance*', '*unifying*', '*have a life of its own*' or '*enrich*', which are abstract and open to interpretation; however, they were not able to articulate fully what they meant. When they were asked to say something more about it, they just repeated the same thing or went back to describing the painting again. It seems that such feelings were either too complicated or too abstract to describe. They had a certain intuitive understanding of these terms or phrases, but did not know how to elaborate on them. Below are some examples.

The following are three extracts from interviews with Connie:

> *I know Van Gogh had a passion to paint. He devoted his life to artistic creation ... he painted incessantly ... I don't know why when I see this painting, I feel that the work of this artist does not look like ordinary posters which are hard and dull, anyway you feel ... how to say it ... It's very difficult to tell ... do you feel the same way? For a layperson, I think that it's difficult to explain.*

> *Yes ... a sense of unifying. But it is difficult to explain. ... His works are different from classical paintings that show everything three-dimensionally, with great detail, and produce a photo-realistic effect. Van Gogh does not paint in this way. The actual world doesn't look like what he paints in his works. Anyway, I feel that it is a painting. At first sight, it is obvious that it is a painting. But within the painting, I sense something more than a painting. It's this quality that stands out from the experience of paintings. This quality is what I call the power of life.*

Even to a layperson like me, Van Gogh's paintings can show his passion and I can feel it. The emotions of the artist draw me into a stage of resonance. Even if it's a clump of grass, you can feel that the grass is alive. I am not sure whether the painting is about grass or not. I'm just using it as an example. ... I think ... let me think ... I think resonance means ... [laugh] it is very difficult to make it clear. Anyway, it is like ... perhaps we use the term very often, but indeed we ...

Connie mentioned '*the passion of life*', but could not articulate what it meant. At first she tried to explain it in terms of the painter's passion to paint. But soon she compared the painting to reproductions that she had seen, claiming that reproductions did not have a life. On another occasion, Connie tried to attribute the 'realness' of the painting to the painter's techniques. She then mentioned '*a sense of unifying*'. It seems that she came to unite with the painting as one. She could not differentiate herself from the painting. The grass and the people in the painting all of a sudden became real. Finally, she mentioned entering '*a stage of resonance*'. When using these descriptive phrases, she insisted that she was a layperson and therefore presumably had no special knowledge of what they meant.

9.2.3 We do not understand how and why feelings are created when we look at paintings.

Although participants were not asked to explain, for example, why they had a certain feeling or how they came to have that association, they tried to give reasons or justifications. However, on some occasions, they had difficulty in offering an explanation. For example, Irene could not understand why she got a sense of the spiritual when she saw the painting:

For the spiritual, it could be ... it's very strong and spiritual and philosophical. It's very different from seeing Western paintings. [pause] I think spiritual ... I don't know why ... I don't exactly know why I feel this way.

Yoko did not understand how paintings and poems worked to convey feelings:

I think it's the images of people described in poems or paintings that matter. Perhaps it is their shapes and forms. No, it's difficult to tell. I don't know how to say it. Sometimes a few words or a few images would be very powerful.

Yoko also had difficulties in explaining how she came to feel what she felt. She owed herself an explanation. She wanted to explain or justify her feelings but she could not:

... the earthy colour makes the painting look miserable. I don't know how to describe the ways in which these colours create a miserable atmosphere. I don't know how I get this feeling.

Yoko did not understand why she had a feeling as soon as she saw the painting:

The title of this painting is 'At ease'. I have more of a feeling of comfortableness and quietness than ease. The colours are gentle. I don't know how to describe it. I had this feeling when I saw the work from a distance. Perhaps all the paintings nearby are very colourful, but this one has a simple composition and gentle colours. ... At first glance, this painting makes me feel nice and I walk closer to look at it.

Sometimes participants showed uncertainty and doubted what they said. For example, Connie said, '*I am not sure ... whether I want to go into the painting or the painting is so good that it draws me into its world.*' In this case, Connie was uncertain about what had taken her inside the painting: her own intention or the 'good' quality of the painting. She knew that there were a few possibilities but she was not sure which one really made her feel like that.

In all the above situations, the participants had unanswered questions. These questions focused mainly on feelings that arose when they were directly in front of the painting. The participants sometimes could not see the connection between what they saw and what they felt. They were looking for some cause and effect relationship between the painting and their feeling. However, it seems that their responses came so directly and immediately that no explanations were available.

9.2.4 Discussion and reflections

I suggest that there are three possible ways of accounting for the participants' inarticulateness when trying to describe their feelings. The first is that the feelings they had while experiencing the paintings were not clear to the participants. They were unable to describe exactly how they felt. Maybe the feeling was too mixed, too vague or too complicated. The second is that the participant was clear about how he or she felt but was simply unable to put it into words. This is different from the first case in that it implies a certain inexpressible quality about the feeling or a certain inadequacy of language that made it impossible for them to express themselves clearly. The third possibility is that participants were responding to certain established beliefs (for example, those contained in modernist and expressionist theory) about feelings and paintings that they had picked up piecemeal.

Many participants did in one way or another mention how they felt about the painting or how they personally felt. During normal museum visits, people do not talk about their

experience. They just walk and see and they are not aware that there will be any opportunity to describe their experience some time later. Looking at paintings in a museum is therefore, for the most part, a personal activity. What the participants recalled during interviews was mainly the experience of looking at paintings on their own, although in some cases they had visited the museum with their friends. Such an experience is different from that of organized museum educational activities. For example, it is common to see museum visitors listening, responding and asking questions in gallery tours, or teachers discussing paintings with students. It was only in the situation of being interviewed that the participants began to think back, and somehow they wanted to talk about their feelings about the paintings. In our natural pre-reflective state of being, we seldom notice ourselves along with the object of our consciousness. It was therefore easier for the participants to describe what they saw – the paintings, the museum environment or the people around them – than what they felt. It seems that this inarticulateness in describing an experience of paintings in a museum in a way reflects the nature of the experience: a bodily involvement with paintings with no consciousness of such involvement. Such bodily involvement can be seen in Connie's mentioning of '*unifying*' and '*resonance*'. The word 'resonance' is derived from the Latin word *resonantia*, which means 'echo' (Barnhart 1995: 657), a hearing of one's own voice. What is common in these descriptions is that the participant is so close to the painting that they almost become one. Moncrieff terms this feature of an experience 'oneness' (1989: 249). Moncrieff describes this inarticulateness and sense of oneness from an existential-phenomenological point of view:

> Her struggle to put into words what she could of the depths of her experience is noteworthy. What happened to her was a new way of being conscious, yet it was simultaneously a new way of behaving.

She could not distinguish her consciousness within the experience from her behavior, or vice versa. Those things that usually seemed to happen in inner and outer worlds were not separate for her. ... Yet there were no clear boundaries. She did not experience her involvement as "subjective," yet clearly it is not "objective." What had happened could not be expressed adequately in the language available to her. (Moncrieff 1989: 251)

Museum visitors' difficulties in describing their feelings about the experience may be related to the nature of reflection or recollection. There is a difference between having a feeling when we see a painting in a museum and recalling the feeling after the experience. To describe the feeling about a painting in a museum that one experienced in the past, the viewer has to recreate her experience and imagine how and what she felt at that time. Human experience is a constant flow, with one experience following another. We may recollect experience, but we cannot have an experience in exactly the same way as one that happened in the past, for our current experience always takes previous experiences into account. Any account of experience captures only part of the total sum of the experience. Therefore, reflections of people on their experiences are 'not *introspective* but *retrospective*' (van Manen 1997: 10, italics in original) in nature, and are not the entirety, but merely instances, of a phenomenon. There will be a loss of detail in such a retrospective activity. Phenomenologists never deny that a recollection of experience is inevitability a 'lesser' version of the actual lived experience, in the sense that we can never recount all the details of an experience during the act of recollection. However, a recollection is also an 'expanded' version of the lived experience, since it takes into account the meanings of the experience accumulated over time.

For some participants, the paintings were connected to feelings and emotions in some way,

but such connections were never simple[2]. Participants admitted having a feeling but the issue was either that they were not clear about how they felt or they could not articulate the feeling. In the first case, what the participants felt may have been vague and unclear and therefore somehow their accounts were vague and unclear too. But it seems that in most instances of inarticulate feelings, participants did not say that their feeling was not clear. Rather, they said that they had a certain feeling but had difficulties in expressing it. If the participants were clear about how they felt but could not articulate it, then the problem perhaps lies more in language. When we are asked to recount our experience of paintings in a museum verbally, we are in a way navigating between words and images. Unique to human beings, words and images are two sets of symbols that we use to represent ourselves and the world surrounding us. Although they share many similar aspects and there are many occasions on which one may be substituted for the other, there is still a certain mystery about how words and images interact with each other. Comparing the relation between words and images to a dialectical trope, Mitchell (1996: 54; 50) suggests that it is 'a relay between semiotic, aesthetic, and social differences' and is 'subject to finite variation, historical transformation and geographical dislocation'. It is still unclear how words become lost when images are being discussed but it is certainly the case that vision, images or visual experiences are not easily reducible to words or language (Mitchell 1996).

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[2] The way in which creative works are connected to feeling and emotions has been a topic for discussion since as early as the pre-Socratic philosophers (Neill 2003). The expressionist theory, in particular, and in a number of different ways, tries to explain how paintings create feelings among their audiences. For example, as I have discussed in Chapter Three, one way to create feelings among viewers is through the content of the painting. Another way is to express feeling through the formal presentation or organization of the painting. In both these ways, according to the expressionist, the painting is a vehicle carrying the artist's feeling and transporting it to the viewers.

The inexpressible feeling which is often a feature of an experience of paintings in a museum, may be due to the gap between words and pictures that Mitchell speaks of.

Another possible way to explain the inexpressibility of the feelings of participants may be by the fact that the participants held the belief that paintings must create feelings – an expectation commonly found among members of the general public regarding the nature and experience of paintings. The participants therefore expected certain feelings to arise when they saw the paintings in the museum, but actually responded in ways other than emotionally. Therefore, when asked about what or how they felt, they had difficulties in describing it.

9.3 The undefined inarticulateness

Besides the themes mentioned in the previous sections, there are a number of other ways in which participants became inarticulate. These cases were so idiosyncratic that I was unable to cluster them into themes, although they were clearly manifestations of the participants having difficulties in expressing themselves.

Although Yoko tried using quite a large number of adjectives and nouns, she still found language inadequate to describe what she *saw* in the painting:

> *Nothing but loneliness, helplessness and emptiness remain. It is difficult to describe what it is like. Besides vague images suggesting people, benches, trees and a road,*

there is nothing else to enrich the composition.

Linda found it difficult to express what she meant by 'beautiful':

I visited the Getty Museum a few years ago. I remember seeing a painting by Monet. After all, I like Impressionist paintings more than others. ... I like it very much and I find it very beautiful. ... It's very different from Monet's paintings that I've seen in books previously. Um ... how to describe it? It's very difficult for me to explain what beautiful is. Let me think. Compared to what I see in books, I think that the painting has a life. It has got a life. It's not a dull reproduction. ... It has energy. It has the power to move. It's not a dead object. It's not dead because sunlight has shone on the painting.

Yoko was not sure whether her view of the painting was correct:

A really good painting should contain rich meanings. For example, a painting about a beautiful ballet dancer dancing elegantly may be an ordinary painting. Everybody who paints this subject matter will produce a beautiful painting for the subject itself is beautiful. Maybe a painting next to this one is about a person with rotten hands and legs. It looks disgusting but perhaps I will look at it for a longer time. I don't know whether this view is correct or not, but such belief becomes stronger after seeing this painting.

In a similar way to Yoko, Ken was not sure about his view of the painting:

Besides the meaning of breaking through, I think the painting may mean something with greater depth or something different. Maybe it has got a lot more to tell. The dark colour may mean something and the sphere may mean another thing.

He was also unsure about the artist's intention:

Perhaps it's also a kind of breakthrough. I don't know what exactly the artist wants to break through. It should mean something more than just breaking the sphere.

Human experience is never clear-cut or easy to analyse, and neither is an experience of paintings in a museum. I have avoided clustering the above descriptions into one single theme but have instead put them together under the broad theme of the non-articulated aspect. After all, they are talking about different things. The only similarity is that the participants are experiencing a certain degree of uncertainty, unclearness, wonder or inexpressibility. It is difficult to reduce the experience to one or two descriptive sentences and highlight their meanings.

9.4 We forget time.

The participants in this study seldom spoke of time when they talked about their experience of paintings. When they were asked about their experience of time, they had difficulty describing it. Some participants said that time passed quickly; some said that they experienced a pause in time, but most were unable to describe it clearly.

Yoko could not remember how long she had spent looking at the painting *The Homeless*. She did not know

> *how long I have watched the painting. The environment is quiet. As this painting is not an arresting one and therefore only very few people are around. ... How long a painting can hold my attention is also important. For other paintings, I just have a glance. I cannot tell how long I have been standing in front of this painting. Certainly it is longer than when seeing other paintings. I am not conscious of the time, therefore I cannot tell how long it takes.*

Mandy did not know how much time she had spent

> *standing in front of the painting, but it does not last long. Then I continue to walk through the whole gallery and come back to the painting later.*

Ken also did not notice the passage of time and he thought that

> *there should be plenty of time for me to walk around the gallery and I plan to have a short rest before joining our classmates. However, I am late. When I finish walking, my classmates are already there waiting for me. I am not conscious of the passage of the time as I am walking around.*

'Time seems to slow as perception sharpens' in a museum (Burnham and Kai-Kee 2005: 65). In all three of the cases quoted above, the participants were completely absorbed and did not have a sense of how time was passing. The sense of temporality had vanished. Usually, when we experience something pleasant or something that we enjoy, 'time flies'. Does this then mean that museum visitors' experience of paintings is necessarily pleasant or enjoyable? Judging from the descriptions of Yoko, Mandy and Ken, museum visitors' experience of paintings is a meaningful experience, rather than a pleasant or enjoyable experience. In the case of Yoko, she felt sad or even disturbed about the poor, homeless people depicted in the painting. For Mandy, her experience of *They're Growing Up* brought back childhood memories and reflections on her past and future life. Ken admired the technical capabilities of the painter and wanted to learn from the painting. So perhaps the dimension of time vanishes when museum visitors are absorbed by what they see, when what they see is meaningful, but not necessarily pleasant. Time is experienced when we are conscious of it. The participants' inarticulateness or lack of comments about time in their experience of paintings may be seen as another reflection of the nature of the

experience. Museum visitors' experience of paintings involves giving their attention to the paintings. The participants are so attentive that they are not conscious of the passage of time.

'If no one asks me what time is, I know; if I am asked, I do not know.' (Augustine quoted in Macann 1993: 197-198). Time has an ongoing dynamic and is experienced in an 'unexperienced' manner. Therefore, when participants talked about objective time or the time that they spent on a painting, they became inarticulate. From another perspective, the participants' unawareness of clock time may be interpreted as an indication that they were involved in 'reflective time' instead of 'objective time' (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962). Reflective time is understood as time linked explicitly to the experiencing person and cannot be analysed in isolation from that person (Heidegger 1927/1976). As discussed earlier, participants engaged in numerous reflections during an experience of paintings in a museum. Such reflections took the form of both images and words, and ranged from personal life to social issues, and from childhood events to recent memories. The viewer may thus be seen not as an individual experiencing time, but as a subject constituting time, during such an experience.

9.5 We forget our body.

In their experiential accounts, the participants mentioned paintings, reproductions, feelings,

images, words, people and the museum environment. However, what lies hidden behind the experience of things, objects or people is the body. What is a body? 'The body is a centre, a point of view on which I cannot take up a point of view' (Macann 1993: 173). Therefore, we cannot hide from our body and we often forget that we experience with our body. A body is not only the physical substance that composes our external physicality, it is the body or I who feels, touches, sees, relates, and thinks. Regarding our body, Polanyi says,

> Our body is the ultimate instrument of all our external knowledge, whether intellectual or practical. In all our waking moments we are *relying* on our awareness of contact of our body with things outside for *attending* to these things. Our own body is the only thing in the world which we normally never experience as an object, but experience always in terms of the world to which we are attending from our body. It is by making this intelligent use of our body that we feel it to be our body, and not a thing outside. (Polanyi 1966: 15-16, italics in original)

Perhaps it is the structure of language as well as the structure of the experience that keeps the body hidden or inarticulate. When asked to describe their experience of paintings, the participants usually spoke about the paintings and the association these paintings evoked, rather than their bodily experience. The apparent 'absence' of the body seems to allow the object to become present. In an experience of paintings in a museum, therefore, the inarticulateness of the body allows other aspects of the experience to be articulated.

I find it particularly useful to understand the inarticulate body in museum visitors' experience of paintings in terms of the 'tacit knowing' and 'bodily indwelling' suggested by Michael Polanyi (1958). Polanyi, who began as a scientist and later became more of a philosopher, talked about inarticulate intelligence and tacit knowing in his book *Personal*

Knowledge (1958). Polanyi claims that '*we can know more than we can tell*' (1966: 4, italics in original). To Polanyi, there are two kinds of awareness in knowing: 'subsidiary awareness and focal awareness' (1958: 58). Take reading as an example (Gill 2000): when we are reading the printed words on a page, we are aware of the meaning of the sentences, and such awareness is basically built on our awareness that the words are written in English, following specific sentence structures and grammatical rules. This awareness of the meaning of the sentences is focal awareness. That is something explicit, something that we can describe. The awareness of the grammatical rules and of the fact that the language is English is subsidiary awareness. This is something tacit, something that we usually cannot describe. Therefore, we rely on some things that we are not aware of in order to focus on others that we are aware of. As summarized by Polanyi, 'we *attend from* something for attending *to* something else' (1966: 10, italics in original). From this observation, Polanyi differentiates two types of knowing: tacit knowing and explicit knowing. Tacit knowing has more to do with subsidiary awareness and bodily activity, while explicit knowing has more to do with focal awareness and conceptual activity (Gill 2000). Polanyi also describes tacit knowing as being 'proximal', that is 'nearer to us', and explicit knowing as 'distal', that is 'further away from us' (1958: 10).

Another concept proposed by Polanyi is that of 'indwelling', an idea closely related to the phenomenological perspective of lived body or embodiment. To Polanyi, the tacit dimension of knowing can only be achieved by our 'indwelling' in the subsidiary. Using the reading example again, 'indwelling' means that we are using or practising English in a way that we are unaware of. To indwell means to live within and we can only dwell in a place or in something with our bodies. We cannot dwell in a place without actually being

there. With regard to the experience of paintings, perhaps 'indwelling' may be understood as 'wandering about' in paintings or as the 'imaginative inhabitation' of paintings, two terms proposed by Maclagan in his discussion of people's experience of paintings (2001: 36). 'By means of our embodiment, we come to live in or 'indwell' the things and ideas, people and institutions, that make up the natural and social worlds that surround us' (Gill 2000: 39-40). By dwelling in the particular or the subsidiary, the body interacts with the surrounding physical and social environment in which tacit knowledge is created. Polanyi states, 'It brings home to us that it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning' (1966: 18). Therefore, bodily indwelling becomes the only way we can engage in tacit knowing.

Polanyi's view on tacit knowing provides insights into interpreting the inarticulateness of people talking about their experience of paintings in a museum. The tacit mode of knowing is a kind of immersion in the context of the knowing situation, involving the knower's senses, knowledge, body, experiences, and various cognitive, social and cultural frameworks. It is by dwelling in or by practising in such bodily and communal realities that we come to know. While we are engaging in the tacit mode of knowing in order to focus on explicit knowledge, we can never articulate the tacit factors. By the same token, the body remains an inarticulate or non-verbal aspect of an experience of paintings in a museum. Therefore, in Polanyi's terms, we use or rely on our body (which is subsidiary awareness) to attend to (which is focal awareness) or see a painting. Normally, we can articulate what we see (the painting) but forget how we see (our body), since it is one integrated act. The body is actually a perceiving device. Perricone (2003) describes

vividly how the human body experiences art:

> The human body is a necessary condition for art experience. It is the source. Without the body there are no objects as human beings perceive, feel, and understand them. The human body, its flesh and blood, its skeletal and muscular structure, its complete central nervous system, the way it moves, twitches, jerks, glides, and breathes is the complex center of experience. Without reflection on the body, without sensitivity to the body's dynamics, without living through the human body, one shall never know what is going on in Degas's studies of dancers, what it is he is trying to capture: the play of form, movement, and light. (Perricone 2003: 24)

9.6 We are silenced.

On some occasions, participants stopped talking and the conversation came to a halt. They might have been searching for suitable words to describe the experience: for example, Connie said, '*In fact, it's something related to Van Gogh's technique of painting. For example, [pause] how to say it ... though the major colour is yellow, ...*'. Other participants might have been engaging in a deep reflection on their experience: for example, Irene said, '*Paintings talk to me. Yes. [pause] ... paintings talk to me [long pause]*'. There was one occasion when Irene was on the verge of tears, '*I don't know ... very ... I don't know. Well, I may cry ... [laugh] ... I need some tissue. I think ... I don't know ... it is strange*'. On another occasion, Irene suddenly said that she did not know what to talk about when she described the experience of Impressionist paintings:

> *Yes, first of all I like the Impressionist paintings in the Courtauld Gallery. Especially ... I can talk about ... [pause] I don't know what to say. [laugh] OK. I can talk about ... Gauguin's painting.*

In our everyday conversation with people, we do pause when we are thinking of an answer. But the participants' pauses were more reflective. The pause often allowed them time to enter into a state of reflection. Another observation is that they took what they said seriously, and therefore they paused and searched for words that could express their experience fully. .

9.7 Two un-reflected themes

During this process of reading participants' interview accounts, I noticed two phenomena that merit discussion. The first is the preference of some participants to describe experiences of looking at paintings which we commonly categorize as Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings. The second is that, to a certain extent, some participants expressed themselves in a way that reflected beliefs about paintings and artists originating from expressionist theory. A discussion of the social and educational contexts that may possibly influence the ways in which participants think about paintings and artists may add another layer of analysis to our understanding of the experience.

9.7.1 Participants chose to talk about Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings.

In the second interviews, the participants talked about paintings that they had just seen at

the Hong Kong Museum of Art (with the exception of Irene and Joe, who visited the National Portrait Gallery). In these circumstances, the participants' choices of paintings were limited to those that were being exhibited in the museum at that time. Hence, many participants talked about paintings by Hong Kong and Chinese artists, including Wu Guanzhong, Zhu Xinghua, Zhou Luyun, and Deng Ningzi. But in the first interviews, when the participants were asked to describe experiences that they had had previously, many of them mentioned paintings by Impressionist and Post-Impressionist artists, including Monet, Manet, Seurat, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne. All the participants are Hong Kong residents (except Mandy, who comes from Taiwan) and ethnically Chinese, but they talked about paintings which come mainly from the European tradition. The following are some examples:

Connie said,

I cannot remember which museum ... maybe in London. It seems to be a work by Seurat ... small dots ... and dots ... bathing ... many children were there ...

There are many paintings by Van Gogh. I remember two paintings. Is there a painting called The Gleaners?

Irene talked about paintings by Cézanne, Manet, and Gauguin:

Yes, yes. I like one of Cézanne's paintings very much, or two of them. They are about trees. I especially like one of them very much.

I sometimes forget myself if I think of that painting, especially Manet's paintings. You know there's one painting by Manet. It's of a river.

I don't know what to say. [laugh] OK. I can talk about another one. It is Gauguin's painting.

Linda said,

> *It is really interesting that my younger brother and I like the paintings of Monet when we talk about art.*

Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings are well-received not only in French- or English-speaking countries, but all over the world. Exhibitions of Impressionist or Post-Impressionist paintings are still guarantees of ticket sales and museum queues (see, e.g., Baker 2002; Gordon 2005; Russell 1986). Jennifer Wong, a contributing editor to the *Art Business News* notes:

> Ask anyone the world over to name a great artist, and many will name an Impressionist, most likely, a French Impressionist. You will hear the names of Monet, Degas, Renoir and Van Gogh. The Impressionists have fascinated and appealed to people around the world for more than 50 years, and today's artists, galleries and publishers see absolutely no signs of the immense appeal of this style of art fading. ... There is little question that Impressionist paintings remain among the most widely appreciated works of art ever produced. (Wong 2001: 1)

The familiar and pleasant subject matter, the rich and somehow attractive use of colours, the promising market value, and the availability of related merchandise such as books, posters, calendars and postcards are some of the reasons contributing to people's love of and familiarity with Impressionist paintings. Without exception, the participants in this study mentioned paintings that they found familiar – paintings that they had seen in books and in the media. As pointed out in the first chapter, for the last fifty years or more, Western art has been the focus of study in Hong Kong schools. Paintings by many Western 'masters' are used frequently to teach art-making and art appreciation. Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings have been commonly used in classrooms

and textbooks to teach about visual elements and concepts[3]. As a consequence, in general, the participants have had many opportunities to come into contact with paintings by Impressionist painters. People are more likely to mention paintings they know or those that they can remember, from a context in which they have been taught previously, or that they have come across in their everyday lives. The predominance of responses dealing with Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings may also be a result of social influence – the influence of the society which 'educates' people about paintings both formally and informally. This is the subject of the following section.

9.7.2 Participants' accounts of their experiences contain tenets of expressionist theory.

The expressive qualities of visual forms, the authentic emotions and feelings of the artist and those evoked in the viewer, and the creative mind and expression of the artist are some of the basic tenets of expressionist theory. The expressionist theory of art, developed principally from eighteenth-century Romanticism, and its related concepts regarding artists, paintings and, in particular, audience response, has influenced the ways in which people experience paintings in a museum. Carroll (1999: 60, 79) notes that, 'perhaps the most recurrent image of the artists in popular culture today remains the emotionally urgent author … trying to get in touch with his or her feelings' and 'so much of the language that

[3] To quote a few examples, in J. Hobbs and R. Salome's *The Visual Experience* (1995), Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* has been used to illustrate the concept of 'lines of sight' (p. 35); Van Gogh's *The Artist's Bedroom at Arles* to illustrate 'expressive qualities of colour' (p. 69-71); Monet's *La Gare St. Lazare, Paris* to illustrate 'space' (p. 74); Seurat's *Bathing at Asnières* to illustrate 'unity' (p. 116); and Monet's *Waterloo Bridge* to illustrate 'rhythm' (p. 122).

we use to characterize a great deal of art rests on the notion of expression'. This influence has extended into art education, as Shiff (2002: 161) describes: 'During the early twentieth century, influential theories in philosophical aesthetics deepened the Romantic perspective by identifying personalized expression as the very foundation of art' and 'even more during the twentieth [century], this notion presented a serious challenge to instruction within schools of art'. Lowenfeld, in his widely-received book, *Creative and Mental Growth*, which was first published in 1947, also suggests that art teachers should facilitate but not intervene, in order to allow children's creative expression to develop without inhibition. Lowenfeld (and in subsequent editions, Lowenfeld and Brittain, 1987) has presented a theory of children's artistic development that echoes expressionist theory, and his child development theory influenced art educators and teachers for several decades after the 1950s (Efland 1990).

Many participants in this study perceived the expressionist aspects of paintings via formal elements such as colours, lines, compositions and shapes. These are the terms commonly used by schoolteachers, books, the media, or experts on paintings such as exhibition reviewers or museum professionals. We are familiar with seeing and discussing paintings in these terms. Although the participants are non-art specialists and therefore did not use the same type of language as art specialists, they did, to a large extent, talk about the visual aspect of paintings. Talking about the visual details of paintings is a response developed from education, and from cultural and social interaction. For many years, not only people with formal art education, but also the general public, have been 'taught' to talk about paintings in a certain way, mainly from the perspectives of visual form, feelings and beauty.

Through public media such as newspapers and television, people acquire many conceptions and beliefs about artists and paintings. For example, in describing their experience of paintings, the participants in this study place a great deal of emphasis on how they feel, the feelings of artists and the conviction that paintings communicate feeling. They also talk about artists as creative individuals with special talents that enable them to express themselves through the 'language of emotions' (Gombrich 1985: 56). The following extract from Fred's interview provides a typical example of the influence of expressionist theory:

> *Feeling is the first thing. I don't know much about lines, space or things like composition and proportion. I only know very little about them. I vaguely understand them, but I don't know how to analyse paintings from such perspectives. Therefore, what is most important to me are the feelings that the painting conveys. I suppose that the artist has got some ideas or images or feelings in his mind. Then he expresses his ideas, images or feelings through colours, composition ... I hope that ... firstly, I have to know what ideas, images or feelings are within myself when I see the painting. Secondly, I try to match what the artist wants to express to what I feel. And finally, I want to communicate with the artist even though I don't know him or it's impossible to know him.*

The way in which we describe our experience of paintings in a museum is, inevitably, affected by our culture, social-economic status or education. Our experience is mediated by who we are and what we have learnt. Foster (1985) notes:

> In this spectacular society the self is reflected everywhere and nowhere – but is nonetheless strictly positioned by sexuality, class and race. (Foster 1985: 68)

Echoing Foster's views on the problems of a unitary self, Clark (1999) also states:

> This self is nonunitary in the sense that there is no single, core self that exists separate and unaffected by its sociocultural context. How we as individuals think about ourselves is shaped by culture, ideology, and

> language; therefore our subjectivity is not straightforward but is, in fact, contested, usually at a level beneath our conscious awareness. (Clark 1999: 42-43)

The expressionist theory of art, which has been influential since the latter part of the last century, colours the participants' descriptions of their experience of paintings. They use terms that are typical of expressionist theory, such as '*resonance*', '*express*', '*feel*', and '*life of their own*'. The participants' descriptions of their experience of paintings in museums are mediated by their conventional understanding of the nature of paintings, art-creating activities and artists acquired through society. The participants' preference for expressionist paintings and their subscription to expressionist theory may be interpreted as a cultural and ideological context in which to understand their experience of paintings in museums. There may be two ways in which expressionist theory works in this respect. The first is that expressionist theory actually influences museum visitors' experience of paintings: that is, the theory frames or guides how people experience. The second is that expressionist theory influences the way in which people describe the experience: that is, people use some of the terms used in expressionist theory to describe their experience.

9.8 Concluding remarks

To be able to articulate means that we know specifically what has happened and to describe distinctly how it is related to ourselves, to other people or to the surrounding environment. In a positivist paradigm, knowledge is demonstrable, either by language or by practice.

From this perspective, many people believe that the only things that we can articulate are the things that we know. However, in a phenomenological paradigm, if there is something that we cannot articulate or demonstrate, this does not mean that it does not exist or that it is unimportant. In many instances, we *know* but we cannot articulate. For example, I can understand a dialect that is used by my parents only when they speak to each other. I never learnt it and my parents do not speak to me using this dialect. I cannot explain, when I am asked how I learnt it, or when I find that I can speak the dialect. Another example, given by Polanyi (1966), is the recognition of human faces. When we are given pictures to identify a person that we have seen, we can do it. But if we are asked to describe the face without the picture, we cannot do it. To talk about the inarticulate is seemingly a formidable task, but the participants' inarticulateness in describing their experience of paintings in a museum means something. The inarticulateness is not part of the experience, but part of our reflection on the experience. The inarticulateness says something about the nature of the experience.

Museum visitors' experience of paintings, like all other human experiences, possesses certain features. The normal un-reflective speech environment renders it difficult to express certain aspects of the experience: for example, the embodiment of the viewer, the way in which time is experienced, and the viewer's feeling. As I have discussed in this chapter on the non-articulated aspects of the experience, the regaining or recovering of the body in an experience of paintings is typical. Since we are not in the habit of articulating our body or our own existence, we have the same difficulty in articulating our experience of paintings in a museum. Gadamer has rightly pointed out that 'the power of the work of art

suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, and yet relates him back to the whole of his existence' (1965/2004: 60-61) and 'every encounter with it [a work of art] [is] an encounter of ourselves' (1970/1976: 95). In an experience of paintings in a museum, the loss of the self is exchanged for a rediscovery of the body. After all, museum visitors' experience of paintings is not a spectator, but bodily, event.

Chapter Ten: Conclusions

10.1 Introduction

In this study, I have listened to adult non-art specialists' accounts of experiences of paintings in a museum, searched for the underlying meanings of each experience and organized them according to themes, and singled out the articulated and the non-articulated aspects of the experience. In drawing conclusions, I would like to go back to the questions that I asked at the beginning of the present study: what is it like for people who have no specialist training in art to experience paintings in a museum? What does such an experience mean to these people? In addition to these two questions, I would also like to ask: does this study help to give me a better understanding of the experience? Will this improved understanding help to enhance people's experience of paintings in museums and to improve the art curriculum in schools and colleges? This chapter presents thoughts derived from the results of the present study and articulates the contributions of the study to the understanding of the experience in general, and the pedagogic implications of the study for art museum personnel, teacher-educators, and school art teachers in particular.

10.2 Contributions to understanding the experience in general

This study acknowledges the complexity of museum visitors' experience of paintings. Understanding the experience of non-art specialists and understanding the experience from a phenomenological perspective are two unique features of the study.

The uniqueness and originality of the present study

An adult non-art specialist's experience of paintings in a museum can be understood as a moment during which an individual dwells in a painting with the whole of her body and mind, experiencing private time and space meaningfully within a public environment. The present study demonstrates that such an experience is an embodied meaning-making process during which the person concerned relates to the painting visually, personally and textually. Instead of discussing the phenomenon as a philosophical, analytical and theoretical concept, this study opens up a discussion of the experience grounded in people's lived experience. The study is original in that it provides descriptions of what it is like for people who have no specialist art training to experience paintings in a museum. The study addresses a gap in the literature: scholarly writing and research on this experience is for the most part theoretical in nature, and refers mainly to the experience of expert viewers. By focusing on people without art training, the study provides a more complete picture of museum visitors' experience of paintings.

Understanding the experience from a phenomenological perspective

Another contribution of the present study lies in its uncovering of some of the

phenomenologically important dimensions of the experience of paintings in a museum. Gaining an insight into the experience from a phenomenological perspective contributes to an understanding of the viewpoint of the experiencing person. I would like to draw attention to the following phenomenological dimensions of the experience:

1. An experience of paintings in a museum includes the presence of some aspects of the experience that we can articulate as well as the absence of some aspects that we cannot articulate. It is such presences and absences that co-constitute the experience and allow us to obtain a fuller picture of what it is.

2. We make sense of paintings through our eyes and such attending to the visual aspects of paintings is an indivisible act of looking, thinking and interpreting. Seeing the painting's visual elements reflectively and pre-reflectively, and experiencing the painting's forms are important aspects of the experience.

3. An experience of paintings necessarily exists in relation to many facets of our lives and the human world, and is a reflection of our lived relations and being-in-the-world. We make sense of paintings by relating them to our daily experience, to images and reproductions that we have seen, to the painter's perceived innate and manifested qualities, and to textual information available. In this process of drawing on our store of personal experience, we gradually build up a personal narrative which is indispensable to understanding and interpreting the painting.

4. Cherishing the presence of original paintings, museum visitors are keen to see these original paintings and value the sense of being with them in the museum. Such a sense of being with something valuable contributes to a strong feeling of the preciousness of the experience and a feeling of closeness to the painter.

5. Museum visitors' experience of paintings creates a phenomenological space for them to think, to reflect and to rest. Such a private space is valued and is necessary in order to see ourselves from a reflective perspective. When we encounter paintings in a museum, we may feel a pause in our daily life and we may feel alone, in spite of the presence of our companions and other museum visitors. At times, we may feel transported, drawn into the picture.

6. Reflecting the basic structure of human consciousness, our experience of paintings is basically a grasp of the intentional object of the experience, that is, the painting. Such a grasp involves not only our vision, but tacitly, we experience the paintings with our body. We experience a re-discovery of the lived body. It is a finding of ourselves in the painting, a heightened awareness of ourselves or a recognizing of ourselves being in the world.

7. Since it involves indwelling in the painting, museum visitors' experience is an embodied experience. This indwelling allows museum visitors to create a meaningful, personal relationship with the painting. Some visitors may also feel uplifted, enriched or relieved by their experience of paintings in a museum.

8. In an experience of paintings in a museum, time is experienced in an 'unexperienced' manner. Time seems to come to a halt, and we dwell in 'reflective time' instead.

9. Museum visitors' experience of paintings is a site-specific experience. The paintings are experienced in relation to the many social, cultural, and ideological conditions of the museum. The museum not only provides a physical environment in which to experience paintings, but also creates many contexts that frame visitors' experiences in the museum.

Contributions to understanding human experience

To understand museum visitors' experience of paintings is to understand one facet of human experience. To understand human experience is to understand our life, to understand why we are here, how we should live and what we do to cope with our lives, in other words, human existence. The present study shows that the experience of paintings is a process during which we experience ourselves as a body and a mind, constantly seeking to make sense of what we see, with objects (that are paintings in the present study) inhabiting the same world that we/our body share. It shows that people and the world are not separate but that they are in a constant dialogue with each other. The world becomes the space in which we orient our body, in which we move around and in which we participate actively in the construction of meaning and relations and in the organization of our activities. Our experience of paintings in a museum may not bring immediate or obvious improvements to our living conditions, such as a better post, a higher income or a healthier physical body. Instead, the 'benefits' are subtle but profound: such an experience

heightens our awareness of being and helps us to acknowledge our own existence as living human beings. We can re-discover ourselves in the experience. Although not necessarily pleasurable or enjoyable, an experience of paintings, in the words of Dewey, becomes:

> the extension of the power of rites and ceremonies to unite men, through a shared celebration, to all incidents and scenes of life. This office is the reward and seal of art. That art weds man and nature is a familiar fact. Art also renders men aware of their union with one another in origin and destiny. (Dewey 1934: 271)

Rather than being escapist or self-indulgent, museum visitors' experience of paintings actively makes use of human knowledge and experience. In contrast to 'losing oneself', as typified in accounts of analytical aesthetics, the experience paintings can be an active discovery of the self. The experience allows people to connect what they see in paintings to their personal lives, bringing it close to what Dewey terms a 'consummatory' experience (1934: 56). Discussing experiences of works of art from a psychological perspective, Funch also acknowledges the 'personally engaging' characteristic of the experience and notes that it is 'an existential actualization where personal resources are actively engaged in a process of psychological transformation' (1997: 236, 241). The present study shows that the experience is a way to recover the existence and importance of the body, which is often neglected in the everyday world. It seems that we know our body well for we are with 'it' all the time. However, from a phenomenological perspective, we know little about how our body knows and experiences. The present study provides insights into how to acknowledge the existence of our often neglected body. The study shows how museum visitors discover the visual aspects of paintings, make connections with knowledge and experience, navigate between feelings and emotions, gain insights into past, present and future living and relate to themselves and others. However, I also have to acknowledge

that not every experience of paintings in a museum is meaningful and that we certainly do not feel a personal relationship to every painting that we see in a museum.

The ideas of 'losing' and of 're-discovering' the body in an experience of paintings seem to contradict each other. It is difficult to explain how we can 'lose' and 'find' our body at the same time. However, if we see the idea of 'losing' as indicating an emptying of ourselves, and that of 'finding' as corresponding to filling ourselves up, then we can understand the phenomenon as being one that in order to fill ourselves up, we must first empty ourselves in order to make some space. To interpret the phenomenon in another way, the shifting between 'losing' and 'finding' our body may be a constant feature of our being in the world. It is only under certain circumstances, such as engaging in a deep reflection, having a pain in our body, or being observed by others, that we come to find or become aware of our body. The sense of finding or re-discovering our body is important, for it not only acknowledges our own existence but also points to an understanding of ourselves in a concrete manner.

10.3 Thoughts for museum educators and professionals

As the present study is a study of the experiences of people, most of whom have visited the museum on their own, I will focus on what the museum can do to facilitate a meaningful experience for individual visitors. In view of the results of the present study, museum

professionals/educators can understand viewers' experiences of paintings as largely encounters of looking for meaning derived from the perceived visual qualities of the painting, personal memories, the museum environment, textual information available and embodied feelings.

Acknowledging museum visitors' personal narratives

According to the results of the present study, museum visitors' experience of paintings is a dynamic combination of those things that are presented in the museum, taking into account the museum's various physical, informational and human contexts, and what is brought by the visitors themselves, including their knowledge, previous experiences, attitudes and beliefs. The role of museums in fostering visitors' experience of paintings is crucial. As shown in this study, the museum is an integral part of the experience. It is the museum, the painting and the viewer that come together to form a meaningful experience. From the perspective of the museum, it is impossible to 'control' or regulate what people 'bring' to their experience of paintings. However, museum professionals should understand, assess and anticipate visitors' needs and interests and create situations in which visitors are able to use museums in ways that are personally meaningful to them.

As is evidenced in the participants' accounts and by relevant museum research (e.g., Doering 1999; Rice 2003, Worts 1995), visitors do not enter a museum empty-handed or with their minds a blank. Museum visitors bring their own narratives to the experience, and with such narratives they make their own interpretations of the paintings. While Falk, Moussouri, and Coulson called visitors' motivations for visiting museums and the strategies

they utilize in the museum 'visitor agendas' (1998: 106); Doering termed such narratives 'entrance narratives' (1999: 81): that is, a basic world view, knowledge of a certain topic, and a range of personal experiences. Museum visitors are not passive contemplators, but active meaning-makers. Rice (2003) argues that museum visitors are far from being 'blank' or passive:

> [T]he notion of the visitor as "dupe" of the institutional "script" implied in much critical literature simply does not hold water. Experience with museum visitors, and the growing body of literature on visitor experience suggests that this is hardly the case. In fact, visitors often come with heavily loaded agendas of their own, and blissfully construct their own narratives in museums. (Rice 2003: 87-88)

In an experience of paintings, the viewer is not simply receiving something that is ready-made, but actively creating something from his or her own experiences. In the words of Leinhardt, Tittle and Knutson, museum visitors 'braid', 'weave' and 'draw an interpretation out of their own lives' (2002: 121, 122, 130). Of course, there are vast differences between people in their ways of making sense of paintings. The present study suggests that they usually start with what they know, what they understand and what they have experienced. Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri found similar results in their study of museum visitors' interpretative strategies. In their words, 'visitors are active in developing their own interpretations of what they see and experience in the museum, and this interpretation is deeply embedded in their prior knowledge and experience' (Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri 2001: 36). The following is an excerpt from the transcript of an interview conducted by Knutson (2002) with an art museum curator. Talking about her experience of preparing a cross-disciplinary exhibition, the curator commented that it is more meaningful if museums think in terms of visitors' experiences and how they connect their experiences with paintings:

> I think the challenge of a curator ... is to find the point of connection between the experience the maker of the work of art is trying to convey and the experiences that visitors can share. [In other words] where is the contact between the past experience that's lost and some experience in the present that [visitors] can connect with? It's nice to think in terms of experience rather than information or background, or aesthetic training; I think experience is a little more democratic. And it also suggests that there are more ways to get that experience than looking at a picture. (Interview, May 4, 2001) (Knutson 2002: 21)

The generation of personally meaningfully narratives by museum visitors is important, particularly to non-art specialists. Instead of depending on expert or ready-made interpretations, museum visitors may create meanings from paintings on their own. Acknowledging museum visitors' personal narratives is actually an empowerment of people's ability to make sense of paintings. Perhaps balancing curatorial views and interpretation with viewers' own interpretations derived from the personal meaning-making process is an important agenda for museum professionals and educators. One way to recognize visitors' personal narratives is to engage them in the process of 'dialogic looking', as suggested by Mckay and Monteverde (2003),

> In dialogic looking, viewers exchange observations, memories, and associations with partners, while maintaining a second, internal dialogue as they work to understand the images they encounter. A third dialogue develops with the work of art itself, as it elicits questions and responses from each viewer. By acknowledging the importance of multiple dialogues, we propose that dialogic looking creates rich educational experiences that do not solely rely on the mediating voice of the museum expert, whether through written wall text or guided tours. (Mckay and Monteverde 2003: 40)

Situating museum visitors and paintings in context

From the accounts of the participants' experiences, we can see that all of them had established personal meanings and connected the paintings they saw in museums to many of their own contexts. Showing how paintings are related to the many contexts in which

they are created, exhibited and discussed is one possible way to encourage people to see paintings from the point of view of their own contexts, thus in a way helping people to construct their own narratives. Becoming more aware of the nature of the museum experience, '[t]oday, museum educators create narratives about objects and design exhibitions that encourage visitors to construct their own narratives' (Paris and Mercer 2002: 408), and 'the inclusion of context and narrative have become increasingly evident in art museums' (Rice 2003: 89).

As mentioned in chapter eight, there is reciprocity between paintings and everyday life. Showing the ways in which paintings are related to different aspects of contemporary life and culture is another method of allowing the generation of meaning by visitors on their own. For example, the Tate Modern, which was opened in the year 2000, organizes its exhibits around themes, such as Still Life/Object/Real Life, Landscape/Matter/Environment and History/Memory/Society, which are in many ways related to people's everyday life experiences (Marsh 2004). Instead of placing paintings in period, style or artist rooms, this method of presentation can prompt viewers to see the painting in the context of their own life experience. Therefore, experimentation with a variety of devices that allow viewers to reflect and relate to their own contexts, rather than knowledge transmission that tells visitors what to learn and what to do, is needed[1].

[1] More examples of the museum's changing ways of organizing exhibitions in order to help visitors build up their interpretative narratives can be found in Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's (2000) book *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture.*

Providing viewers and paintings with linkages

As reflected in the participants' accounts, museum visitors' experience of paintings is likely to be connected to other images or art forms, therefore intelligent placement or juxtaposition of paintings with other paintings or cultural objects may be attempted to initiate a kind of meaningful linkage. Wentworth (2004) also argues for the importance of viewing paintings in relation to other paintings. Wentworth (2004: 251) calls such a context the 'pictorial context': that is, 'both the surrounding paintings in an exhibition or museum, as well as the range of paintings the viewer has previously encountered and his perception and understanding of these'. For example, the British Museum has published a series of books based on themes such as *Smile* (Vaizey 2002), featuring a variety of smiles depicted in prints, drawings, sculpture and crafts drawn from different times and civilizations. Although the publication does not accompany an exhibition of related objects, it provides examples that help visitors to link museum objects meaningfully. Museums may also consider thematic exhibitions of paintings with other forms of artistic products such as literature, performance and musical works, for a richer experience involving cross-disciplinary connections. Knutson's (2002) ethnographic study of an exhibition entitled *Light! The Industrial Age 1750-1900, Art & Science, Technology & Society* held in the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh 2001 describes an example of this type of experience, which integrates paintings with scientific objects and the subject of light. The exhibition not only shows how painters, such as Turner, Van Gogh and Monet, portray light in their paintings, but also reveals the intellectual, scientific and technological aspects of light and its impact on people's daily lives. The presentation method and the kind of messages that a museum intends to communicate are as important as the selection of

paintings themselves.

Presenting multiple interpretations

This study shows that museum visitors, in particular non-art specialists, resorted to textual means to understand paintings. Sometimes they saw written or audio texts as more revealing than visual images. The provision and presentation of written information in the museum is, therefore, another important consideration, because museum visitors are very likely to read it and relate it to the paintings that they see. Hooper-Greenhill and her associates' study on visitors' interpretative strategies also showed that the use of support materials supplied by the gallery was common and that they were used in a variety of ways (Hooper-Greenhill et al. 2001). Methods of presenting paintings are moving away from the traditional, singular interpretation of paintings, that is, from the eyes of art historians, scholars or the curator, to an accommodation of diverse voices (Ravelli 2006). When presenting paintings in an exhibition, museum curators should be aware that their views represent particular ways of seeing paintings. They cannot assume a position of neutrality and should make the curatorial intent explicit. The provision of textual information, if carried out in an informative, non-authoritative and unobtrusive manner, can help participants build up a personal understanding of the painting. With this information, viewers embark on an active interpretive process and try to understand the painting in terms of the text, or to understand the text in terms of the painting. The ways in which information is presented are as important as the amount and the kind of information that is presented. In view of the experiential accounts of the participants in this study, I suggest that information should be presented as one *possible* way or some possible ways, among

others, of approaching paintings. Regarding the nature of the information presented, I suggest that something that pertains to the *meaning* of the painting would be appropriate. But the meaning to whom? The painting may mean different things to the painter, to the patron who commissioned the painting, to the person being painted, to people who lived at the time the painting was painted, to an art historian, to a Marxist theorist or to a museum visitor with little education or experience of art. It is not within the scope of this study to decide on the content of the textual information which should be provided in a museum, but I suggest that information should be open rather than closed, that it should encourage interpretation rather than present a final analysis, and that it should solicit responses rather than end a dialogue. Museum visitors should also have an opportunity to obtain the kind of information they want. In short, people should be allowed to choose their starting points, exercise their options and shape their own routes. In addressing the audience's diverse needs, Prior (2003) also calls for a multi-task museum in which visitors may find their own ways to experience:

> The point is, contemporary museums are complex, double-coded organizations in which composite tendencies are absorbed and played out. ... Like chemical allotropes, museums can exist in two or more forms whilst inhabiting a broad (museological) state of matter. As a result, they can, and do, package themselves in different ways to different audiences. Scholars can study, hedonistic tourists can "do" blockbuster exhibitions at speed, "informed" visitors can regularly tackle the intricacies of the permanent collection, and computer-literate schoolchildren can scan the museum's objects from their desktops. (Prior 2003: 64)

Creating a restful and free-flowing space

As I have noted in chapter eight, museum visitors' experience of paintings is a place-based experience. Museum visitors not only experience the paintings but also the museum environment. In terms of museum environment, what museums can do is to create an

atmosphere conducive to a variety of experiences. Among these experiences, reflective experience is common. Such an environment would mean quietness, though not absolute silence, and a sense of space, though not vastness or emptiness. As museum visitors' experience of paintings tends not only to be physically laborious but also mentally exhausting, adequate seating with plenty of benches or book-filled corners in the museum will provide visitors with places where they can rest and look at the paintings in comfort. Some modern art museums tend to hide labels and captions since they regard them as unimportant. If they have to show the labels, they try to make them small and place them in obscure positions so as to minimize distraction from the displayed paintings. However, since the present study has shown that viewers frequently engage in reading textual information in the museum, signs detailing this information should be clear. Captions and labels should also be placed in reasonable proximity to the paintings.

10.4 Thoughts for teacher-educators and school art teachers

Being an in-service and pre-service art teacher-educator, I am eager to know how my students, who are mainly non-art specialists, experience paintings in a museum. I want to understand their experience for two reasons. The first is that I will be better able to plan the curriculum: in particular, areas such as art appreciation and criticism, art history, aesthetics, and ways of using community resources such as museums and galleries. The second is that by encouraging my students to understand their own experience, I hope that

they will be better able to teach in their current or future posts as primary and secondary school art teachers. This section discusses how the understanding of the experience of paintings in a museum informs the teaching of art appreciation and criticism, studies of paintings in schools and colleges, and planning for museum visits. The suggestions below may apply not only to art teacher education, but also to primary and secondary school education.

Developing students' visual sensitivity and sensibility

Judging from the results of the study, it is clear that museum visitors without an art specialist background approach paintings in a number of ways. Predominantly, museum visitors begin their experience of paintings by paying attention to the visual aspects of the paintings. There are many reasons for this. As I have suggested in chapters eight and nine, it may be due to the entrenched modernist approach to visual objects, which has been prevalent in our society for more than a hundred years. A painting, basically a visual object, can be approached visually. We may subscribe to the many established ways of using formal elements or structures to interpret a painting or to understand the pictorial arrangement of a painting. Teachers and teacher-educators should be aware that students are likely to tackle a painting initially in terms of its visual aspect. There may be students who are particularly sensitive to forms and they may prefer to make sense of a painting from the formal and aesthetic perspective. It is important to develop students' sensibility and sensitivity towards how visual elements are used and how visual effects are achieved. This study has shown that the establishment of an interest in the visual aspect of paintings in the first place is an important feature of the experience. Stimulating students' interest

visually may be the first step in involving them in experiencing paintings. Teachers and teacher-educators should introduce the elements and principles of visual design within the overall art curriculum. As I have emphasized in previous chapters, seeing is only the first step to interpretation; therefore, the teaching and learning of visual elements and the effects that they create should be related to real situations, such as looking at a painting. Teaching visual elements in isolation, or in the form of universal governing rules that may be used to analyse all sorts of paintings or visual objects is not useful. It deprives students of opportunities to understand how paintings are related visually in a meaningful context. More importantly, teachers should be aware that experiencing paintings from the visual perspective is neither the only nor necessarily the best way.

Exploring paintings from a perspective other than the aesthetic

Many participants in this study responded to paintings primarily from an aesthetic perspective and sometimes emphasized emotions and feelings. As a teacher and teacher-educator, I argue that it is important to allow students, in particular students at senior secondary level and college students, to learn to understand why people respond in this way. A first step in this direction could be, for example, for a teacher to initiate a student project investigating the history, concepts and beliefs of the expressionist and modernist theories. Moreover, students should be encouraged not to see paintings solely as expressions of artists' emotions and feelings, but to explore paintings from perspectives other than the aesthetic. As discussed in the literature review chapters, paintings assume different roles in different contexts. In our present curriculum in both colleges and schools, the emphasis on the learning of forms and visual elements should be balanced by

discussions on how paintings can be viewed from other perspectives: for example, the historical, social or cultural perspectives. Addison and Burgess (2003: 158), for instance, advocate a 'critical study' that 'recognise[s] art as a differentiated instance of a wider phenomenon, that of visual and material culture' and a curriculum that 'interrogate[s] the modernist myths upon which school art is dependent'. They also suggest that student teachers may act as agents of change within the school curriculum which places much emphasis on practical art-making activities and the learning of formalist principles. In the preparation of secondary school art teachers, Addison and Burgess involve them in curriculum projects in which modernist concepts such as the universality of art and notions of originality and genius are examined.

Initiating meaningful personal connection

We may begin with the visual aspect in seeing a painting, but we certainly should not end with it. As evidenced in the participants' accounts of their experiences, there are many other ways to make sense of a painting. Connecting the experience of paintings to other lived experience is an important dimension of the experience. It is a personally meaningful dimension. It is from such connections that museum visitors begin to have a personal encounter and develop their own narratives with the painting. Perhaps, besides asking questions such as 'What do you see in the painting?' or 'Tell me what you see in the painting', we may further ask students to explain how the painting is connected to them, that is, to their own personal lives. Probing questions should be drawn from a broader life-contextual dimension, in addition to asking students what they see in a painting. Students may be encouraged to talk about how the painting is related to people they know,

places they have visited, objects they have seen before, a film or other works of art they are familiar with, subjects they are studying at school, memories of the past, and so on. Teachers and teacher-educators can make a list of things to think about beforehand. It is from these connections that we can start a meaningful conversation with the students about paintings. Building a meaningful narrative to interpret a painting is important because viewers will have a sense of 'owning' the experience. It is not something being told to them, but something they make and own. Students may feel confident about being able to make sense of paintings instead of relying others for interpretation. It was found that children enjoy both story-telling and information presented in a narrative style in their museum experience (Anderson et al. 2002). An understanding of the students' life-world will also help teachers and teacher-educators plan museum visits, as they will then have an idea of what students may relate to their experience of paintings.

An experience of paintings in a museum is always an interpretation which grows out of personal experience. Respect, encouragement and patience to listen are important if the teacher and teacher-educator want to maintain the dialogue with the students, when they are asked to talk about their experience. Very possibly there will be multiple interpretations, as students' accounts are a result of negotiation. As mentioned in chapter eight, while maintaining every interpretation as a plausible interpretation, teachers, as well as the students themselves, can always look for agreement (not necessarily complete or total agreement) by judging that the interpretation is reasonably linked to various aspects of the painting. Paskow (2004) notes that:

> In viewing the world, there is a certain plasticity and freedom, depending in part on our current orientation and level of self-confidence, our intuitive sense of the possibility of making an important advance in

understanding, the degree of trust that we place in the other person, and so on. Our differences in response to a painting may, therefore, be conceived not so much as barriers that separate us from each other, but instead as doors that could be opened, if responded to properly and under the right circumstances, enabling us to become closer to each other, with complete agreement being only, as I have said, an asymptotic goal. (Paskow 2004: 190)

There are many different kinds or styles of paintings and many ways to look at, talk about and analyse them. No one can claim that his or her views will be the last word on a painting. Confirming the active role of viewers, Porter (1996) suggests that:

> Through presenting themselves as workshops and studios rather than shrines, and supporting others to use their tools and methods with different outcomes, museums can become the sites for active and creative production, the presentation and exchange of diverse viewpoints, and the dynamic (re)interpretation of collections and histories. (Porter 1996: 113-114)

Having a certain kind of feeling evoked by a painting seems to be a prominent feature of experiencing paintings in a museum. However, for teachers and teacher-educators, it may be misleading to ask, 'What do you feel?' in the very first moment after their students have looked at a painting in a museum, since this presupposes that the function of a painting is to make the viewer feel something. As demonstrated in our examination of the non-articulated aspects of the experience of paintings in a museum, students may have difficulty in expressing how they feel. Asking students to describe what they feel reflects the long-held belief that paintings make people feel, but there are times when people do not respond in this way. Rather than posing a vague and general question such as 'How do you feel?' at the very beginning of the museum visit, perhaps the teacher may reframe the question thus: 'Does the painting remind you of anything, any places or any person that you have a personal feeling about?' Or the teacher may ask, 'What is this painting for?' An

alternative is to ask students to write reflections after museum visits so that they have more time to assemble their thoughts.

Connecting the experience to texts and images

The participants in the present study connected paintings in a museum with other art images or other artistic creations. Teachers and teacher-educators may make good use of the experience to connect with other subject disciplines, such as language, drama, dance and music. Making such connections is likely to enhance the students' understanding and experience of paintings in a wider context. It is also an opportunity to foster cross-disciplinary learning. Connecting the paintings to textual information is another way to initiate an experience of paintings in a museum. As discussed in chapter eight, textual information ranges from all the written information available within the museum building to that which is specially prepared by the teacher before or after the museum visit. Students may be asked to relate what they see in the paintings, or what they are reminded of from their personal experiences, to what is written by the painter, museum educators, art critics or students themselves. Textual information does not always have to dominate the visual experience. Teachers may make thoughtful use of the textual information available to enhance an experience of paintings: for example, by asking students to collect texts written about a painting that are available in a museum and discuss them after the museum visit (Gooding-Brown 2000). A study of the beliefs and assumptions underlying these texts will also be a good initiating activity for a critique of various aesthetic theories.

Relating the painter to the painting is typical of museum visitors' experience of paintings,

as suggested in the present study. For teachers and teacher-educators, providing information regarding the biographical details, painting styles, images of the painter and his/her other works may be considered as a way of stimulating students to make a connection with the painter. However, how much and what kind of information about the painter should be given to students? And, more importantly, how and when should such information be offered? These are two significant questions that teachers have to think about. Judging from the results of this study, museum visitors may understand a painting better, or be able to consider it from a wider range of perspectives, if they have a certain amount of knowledge about the painter. In the conclusion to their study on museum visitors, Hooper-Greenhill and Mousssouri (2001; 35) also note that 'more information about the artists and their interpretation of their own work seemed to contribute to visitors' ability to connect to the art works'.

Revisiting the paintings using reproductions

In this study, it was found that museum visitors generally prefer to see original paintings in the museum rather than reproductions, for the sake of the original paintings' immediate presence and other related qualities. However, the study also shows that people like to connect seeing original paintings with their experience of seeing reproductions. A number of studies (e.g., Lachapelle, Murray and Neim 2003; Paskow 2004) stress the importance of revisiting a painting and doing 'postviewing research' (Paskow 2004: 181) for a better viewing and learning experience. In real school and college situations, multiple museum visits may not always be possible, and viewing reproductions of paintings is an alternative. Seeing original paintings in the museum may be scheduled either before or after viewing

reproductions. In the first case, students visit the museum and see the original painting. Follow-up activities may be carried out at school using reproductions to explore the painting further. In the second case, teachers may ask students to get a general impression of the painting first through viewing reproductions, such as slides, postcards or images in books or on the internet. After such viewing activities and the subsequent visit to the museum, students may be asked to compare the two experiences. The experience of the painting may be refreshed when students see the reproductions of the painting, adding new meanings or refining meaning obtained during the first encounter. However, teachers should caution against 'over-teaching' during the first viewing activities. It will be sufficient for students to gain an acquaintance or familiarity with the painting, rather than to undergo heavy coaching on the historical, stylistic and contextual perspectives of the painting. As there are also opportunities for people to look for original paintings after they have seen a reproduction some time before, teachers and teacher-educators should make full use of the art curriculum to provide opportunities to familiarize students with painting images. Teachers may hope that somewhere, at some time, the students will be able to relate the reproductions they see at school to the original paintings they see in the museum. Discussions of the different characteristics of seeing original paintings and seeing reproductions may also result in a heightened awareness of the differences between the two viewing experiences.

Creating opportunities for personal exploration

Many participants described their experience as a personal experience, and their accounts are of experiences of visiting museums alone. It seems that the experiences of paintings

that were particularly meaningful to the participants were those that had occurred when they had visited the museum by themselves. This implies that guided museum visits with teachers or museum educators who take the lead in explaining paintings may engage people in different ways, perhaps educationally or intellectually. In addition to involving students in structured activities such as group discussions, therefore, teachers and teacher-educators should consider creating time and opportunities for students to look at paintings on their own during a museum visit. Keeping students on task is a priority; however, giving students some time to walk around and explore by themselves in the museum is equally important. Although discipline problems may arise, and certainly not all the students will really be engaging in looking at paintings, it is still worthwhile giving them some free time to explore alone. The extent to which students can move about freely in the museum will depend on their age. Teachers should consider a visit to a museum as something more than an opportunity to collect factual information about paintings: it is also a chance for students to have experiences of something meaningful and fulfilling by themselves.

Reawakening the body in an experience of paintings

As pointed out earlier in the conclusion, the experience of paintings in a museum is an embodied experience. How can teachers and teacher-educators help students to use their own bodies intelligently to experience paintings? How can teachers enable students to *dwell in* a painting? Perhaps it is impossible for teachers to do this, or even if they make the attempt, they can never be sure whether they have been successful. Actually, we always use our body to experience, but often we take this for granted and we seldom talk about it. What teachers can do is to prepare students in all sorts of ways so they may

make use of their various cognitive, social and cultural frameworks in experiencing a painting. For example, teachers can provide opportunities for students to get used to the museum environment when they are young, to see paintings and visit museums on a regular basis and to talk about their experiences of paintings and the museum in daily life, and in particular during art lessons. We may refer to these pedagogic activities as the 'interiorizing' (Polanyi 1958: 24) of what students may make use of when they encounter a painting in the future. It is not a kind of training or learning that seeks immediate effects, but is rather groundwork that may enable students to become meaningfully engaged with paintings in a museum. Making students explicitly aware of the bodily dimension of the experience of paintings in a museum is not particularly desirable. Students will experience paintings through their bodies, regardless of whether or not they are aware of doing so.

Teachers should understand that museum visits and the experience of paintings may not make an observable impact on students' learning of art, especially on a short-term basis. That students cannot vividly describe their experience of paintings in a museum does not necessarily mean that they gain nothing from the visit, however. Some of the knowledge gained is tacit rather than explicit. The experience of paintings in a museum may or may not result in a better understanding of art history, art theories or art-making. However, the experience itself can be meaningful to the individual. Having a personally meaningful experience may then inspire museum visitors to learn more about art history, art theories or art-making. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between having meaningful experiences with paintings and learning about paintings. It is natural to suppose that if we

know more about a painting and understand a painting better with the help of teachers, museum educators or museum docents, it is more likely that we will have a meaningful experience of that painting.

10.5 Directions for future studies

The experience of paintings in a museum is an experience during which people construct meaning with the paintings. A study involving people experiencing different museum objects would be of interest to museums and art educators. While paintings are made principally for people to look at, pots and ceramics are objects made for people to use. As a practising ceramist and sculptor, I would be interested to know how people experience pottery, a functional sort of object when compared to paintings, which are largely seen as non-functional. Will the experience of touching and holding the pots be an important aspect of the experience? Will the feeling of history and culture be more prominent in the experience of pottery? Is the experience of actually using the pottery very different from that of just contemplating or looking at the object? If there is a difference, what is it? Will the body play an even more important part in an experience of ceramic objects?

During the interviews, I noticed that different museum visitors seem to have their own 'style' of approaching paintings. For example, Linda connected paintings largely with literary texts; Connie responded visually; Fred associated paintings with a variety of

emotions and feelings; Mandy's experience was highly personal; and Irene's responses were predominantly intellectual. Is there any relationship between biographical backgrounds and responses to paintings? A study of the styles of responding to paintings may afford insights into the ways in which we can accommodate the needs and interests of different types of museum visitor. A focus on the experience of one or two paintings may be the method to collect data so that responses from different museum visitors may be compared against each other.

While previous research has focused on people who are specially informed about art or paintings, the present study captured the experience of non-art specialists. Although there are similarities in the ways in which both groups of people respond to paintings, further studies may focus on the differences in their experience of paintings in a museum. I suggest that it would be useful to investigate whether art specialists tend to relate a painting more to their knowledge of art and paintings while non-art specialists tend to relate it more to their personal everyday experience. Such studies will be valuable if we wish to know how art education and familiarity with paintings make a difference in museum visitors' experience of works of art. Inviting a specialist and a non-specialist to talk about their experiences of the same painting may be one possible way to collect data.

10.6 Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the importance of the present study and the contributions it makes to understanding the experience of paintings in a museum as a reflective, meaningful and personal encounter with ourselves in a museum. A section has been included to point out some of the most significant phenomenological dimensions of the experience of paintings in a museum. Suggestions and recommendations for museum personnel and art educators in both schools and universities have also been included, with a focus on how to create situations in which people may experience paintings in a museum more meaningfully. I have also pointed out some possible directions for future studies on the topic.

I would like the end the thesis with a description of my recent experience of Raphael's paintings at the National Gallery. I will undoubtedly continue to experience paintings in museums in the future. However, I think that I am different now, as a result of the deeper understanding of the experience which I have acquired over the past six years:

> *I'm totally stuck. I feel cold again in front of Raphael's Saint Catherine. There is nothing except colours. There's no woman, no landscape, no religious stories and no words. That's not a painting. It's a palette. It's Raphael's palette showing four different vibrant, but subtly toned colours. The right sleeve is green, the dress of the body blue, the left sleeve and part of the drapery covering the thighs red, the turned inside-out part of the drapery yellow. The colours are so intense and brilliant. I can't find a thing in the world that can match them.*
>
> *I guess I've seen Saint Catherine before as it's in a collection of the National Gallery. I've visited the National Gallery so many times during the last few years. Certainly I've seen it before. I've even used the painting, I mean a slide reproduction, to teach*

about the relationship between art and religion. I know the story behind the painting well. However, I have never had such a feeling as today. I'll shiver whenever I see or listen to something that moves me. I don't know why. Perhaps it's my natural response. Today I've that shiver again, twice, in front of Saint Catherine. A certain kind of coldness stretches from the very top of my head to my arms and then the whole body.

After seeing Saint Catherine, I look at other oil paintings in the exhibition. I don't even bother to walk near all those drawings. Raphael's other paintings, The Alba Madonna, Portrait of Pope Julius II, and The Ansidei Madonna, are all the same. They are nothing but tributes to the Colour.

Afterword

For the last seven years, I have been immersed in literature related to people's experience of paintings and the experience being studied. It is out from these readings and experiences that the interpretation of findings derived. I do not expect to provide readers with results that are generalizable to all situations or universals that govern the phenomenon. This study is hermeneutic in nature. I would like to offer some possible interpretations that may add new dimensions to the existing understanding of the experience. Looking back, I think the study will be better informed if I focus more on Dewey's emphasis on art as experience and the continuity of aesthetics in daily life. Merleau-Ponty's discussion on the role of body in the experience of the world and the relation between body, mind, and vision will be another area that I would like to explore more. I will also try to keep a journal of my experience of paintings so that I can see how my own experience changes along the changes with my understanding of the experience.

I consider my PhD studies as a learning process. Now I have gained a much better understanding of how non-art specialists experience paintings in museum, which in turn will influence my teaching of art student-teachers. The study has also enhanced my understanding of aesthetic theories, and the understanding of phenomenology as both a philosophical and a research method. I have learnt a great deal from the research process, in particular, the respect of the uniqueness of data, the teasing out of themes from transcribed interviews, the working back and forth with the data and engage in the so-called hermeneutic cycle, and most importantly, the using of language and academic writing.

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Appendix 1: Painting Images in Chapter One

Page	Painting	Image and Information
10	1	

Jackson Pollock (1912-1956)

***The Deep*, 1953**

Oil and enamel on canvas

220.4 cm × 150.2 cm

Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris

Reproduced from Lewison, J. (1999). *Interpreting Pollock*. London: Tate Gallery Publishing, p. 79.

10	2	

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

***Guernica*, 1937**

Oil on canvas

349.3 cm × 776.6 cm

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid

Reproduced from Utley, G. (2000). *Picasso The Communist years*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 24.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
11	3	

Jean-François Millet (1914-1875)

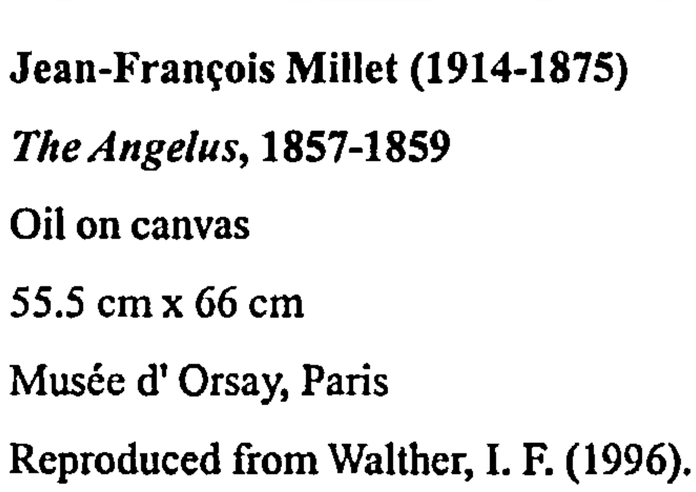
***The Angelus*, 1857-1859**

Oil on canvas

55.5 cm x 66 cm

Musée d' Orsay, Paris

Reproduced from Walther, I. F. (1996). *Masterpieces of western art: A history of art in 900 individual studies, Volume 2*. Köln: Taschen, p. 442.

11	4	

Sandro Botticelli (1455-1510)

***Virgin and Child with Eight Angels*, c. 1481-1483**

Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen Preussicher Kulturbesitz, Berlin

Reproduced from Lightbown, R. (1989). *Sandro Botticelli: Life and work*. New York: Abbeville Press, p.186.

(Paul Tillich mentioned that he saw *Madonna with Singing Angels* at the Kaiser Friederich Museum. The Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum was renamed the Bode Museum in 1956 and is now managed by the National Museums of Berlin. The museum is currently closed for rennovation and is expected to re-open in 2006. I cannot find *Madonna with Singing Angels* in the museum collection, but *Virgin and Child with Eight Angels* (with four angels singing at the back), is the one that corresponds to Tillich's description.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
12	5	

Claude Monet (1840-1926)

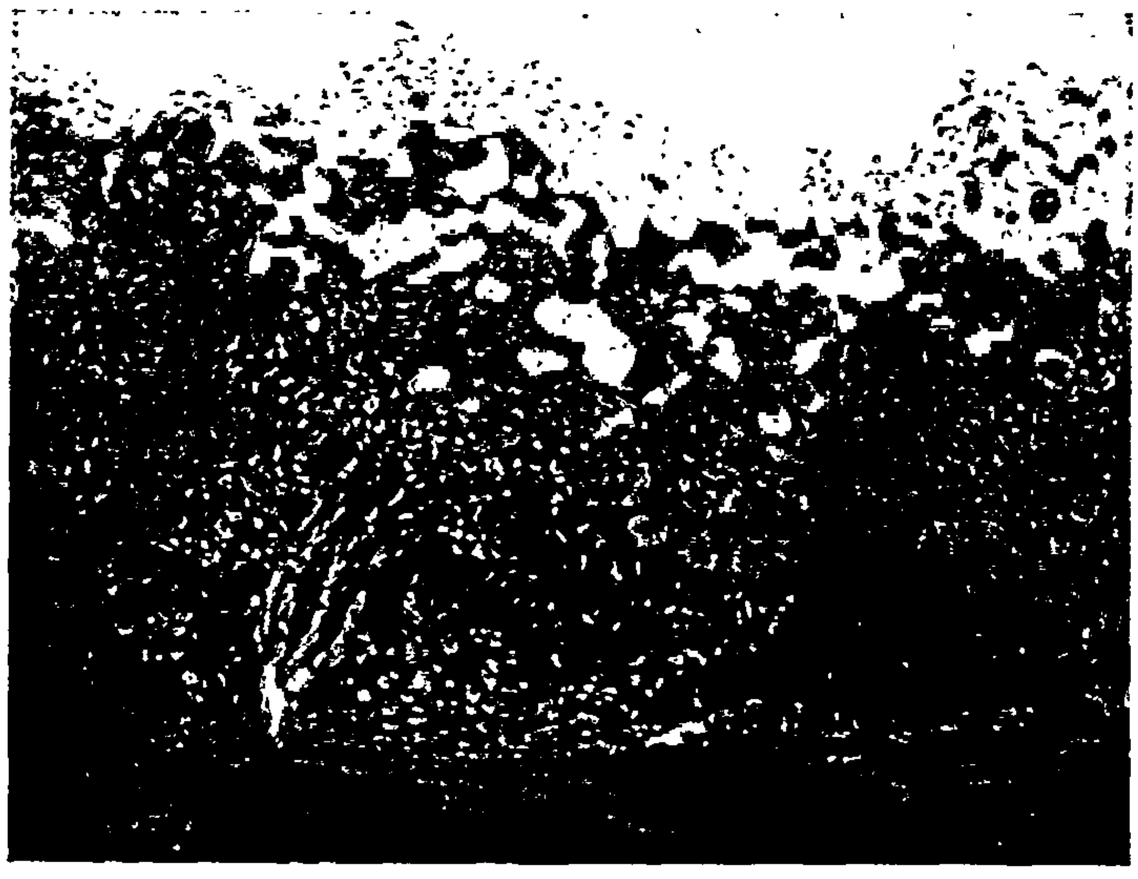
***Lilacs, Grey Weather*, 1872**

Oil on canvas

48 cm x 64 cm

Musée d' Orsay, Paris

Reproduced from Sagner-Düchting, K. (1996). *Claude Monet, 1840-1926: A feast for the eyes* (K. Williams, Trans.). Köln: Benedikt Taschen, p. 59.

12	6	

Claude Monet (1840-1926)

***Lilacs in the Sun*, 1872**

Oil on canvas

50 cm x 65 cm

Pushkin Museum, Moscow

Reproduced from Wildenstein, D. (1996). *Claude Monet, biography and catalogue raisonné*. Köln: Taschen, p. 93.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
13	7	

Tom Thomson (1877-1917)

***The West Wind*, 1916-17**

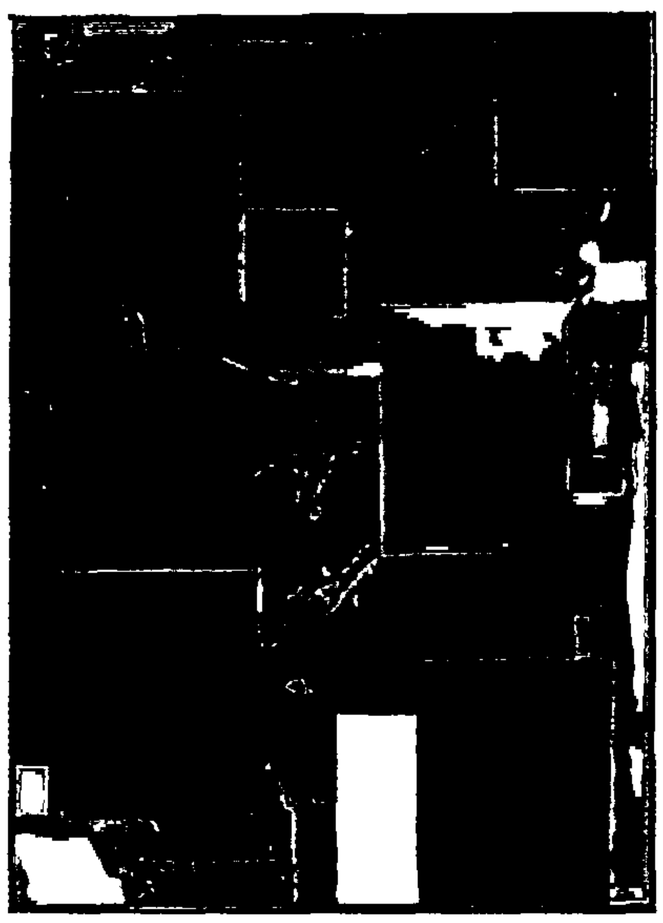
Oil on canvas

120.7 x 137.9 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

Reproduced from the Artchive

http://www.artchive.com/artchive/G/groupseven/thomson_west_wind.jpg.html

14	8	

Hans Hofmann (1880-1966)

***Goliath*, 1960**

Oil on canvas

214 cm x 152.5 cm

Berkeley Art Museum, California

Reproduced from Goodman, C. (1996). *Hans Hofmann*. New York: Abbeville Press, frontispiece.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
15	9	

Lawren Stewart Harris (1885-1970)

***Mount Temple*, 1925**

Oil on board

30.5 cm x 37.5 cm.

McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Ontario

Reproduced from Encore Fine Art

http://encorefineart.com/FullPicView.asp?hkey=1793

Appendix 2: Painting Images in Chapter Eight

Page	Painting	Image and Information

194 1

Lawren Stewart Harris (1885-1970)

***Mount Temple*, 1925**

Oil on board

30.5 cm x 37.5 cm.

McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Ontario

Reproduced from Encore Fine Art

http://encorefineart.com/FullPicView.asp?hkey=1793

195, 206 2

Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

***Wind From the Sea*, 1997**

Ink and colour on paper

145 cm x 368 cm

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 142-143.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
196, 221, 226, 227, 228, 244, 247	3	

Zhu Xinghua (1935-)

***The Homeless*, 1987**

Ink and colour on paper

163 cm x 95 cm

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Reproduced from Hong Kong Museum of Art

http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Arts/english/collections/ecollections-db.html

192	4	

Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675)

***Young Woman with a Water Jug*, 1664-65**

Oil on canvas

46 cm x 41 cm

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Reproduced from Duparc, J., & Wheelock, A. (1996). *Johannes Vermeer*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 147.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
200	5	

Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

***Forest at the Foot of Yulong Mountain*, 1978**

Oil on canvas

77 cm x 66 cm

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 216.

239	6	

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

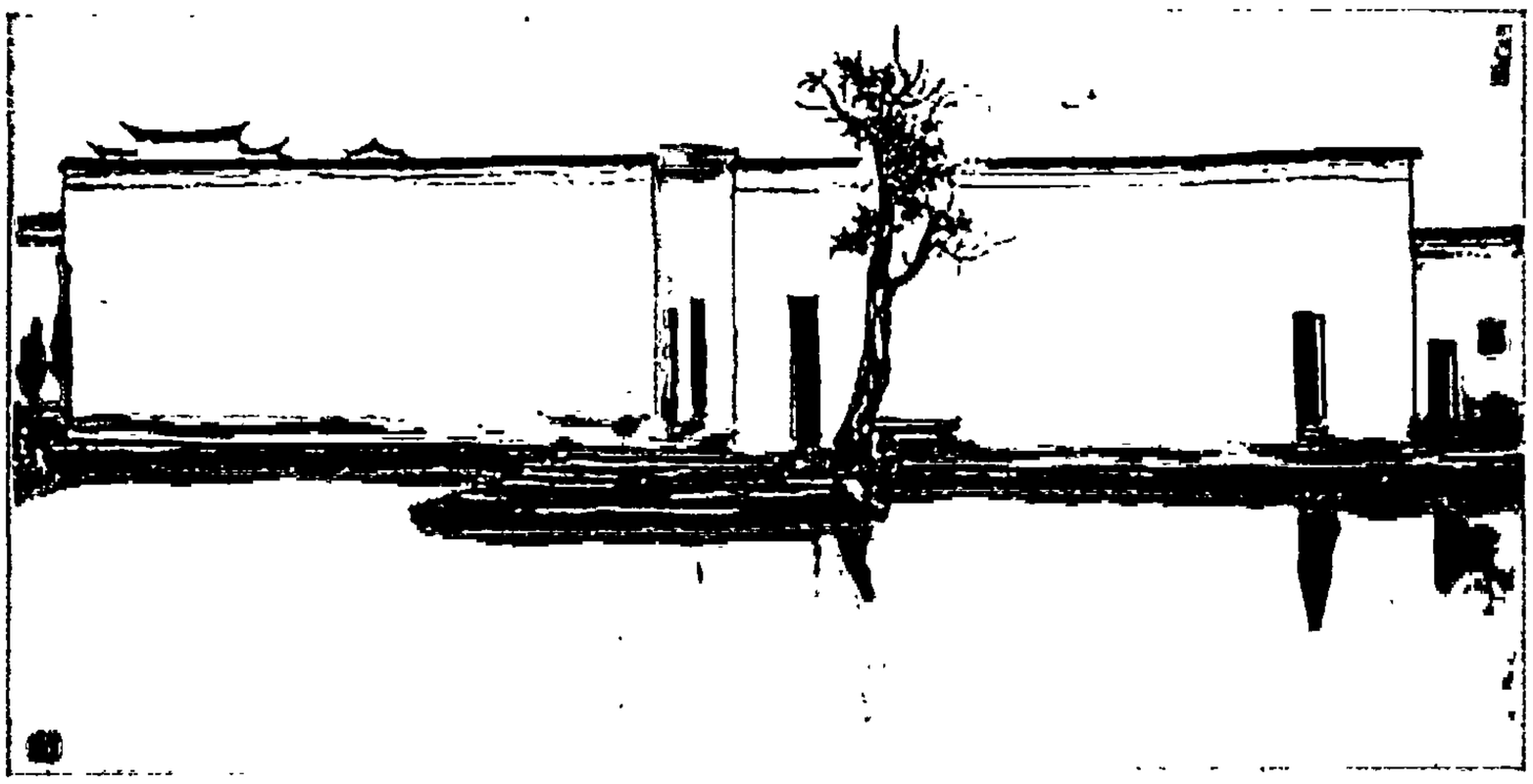
***The Siesta (after Millet)*, 1889-1890**

Oil on canvas

73 cm x 91 cm

Musée d' Orsay, Paris

Reproduced from Whiteley, L. (2000). *Van Gogh: Life and works*. London: Cassell & Co, p. 121.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
207, 214, 215	7	

Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

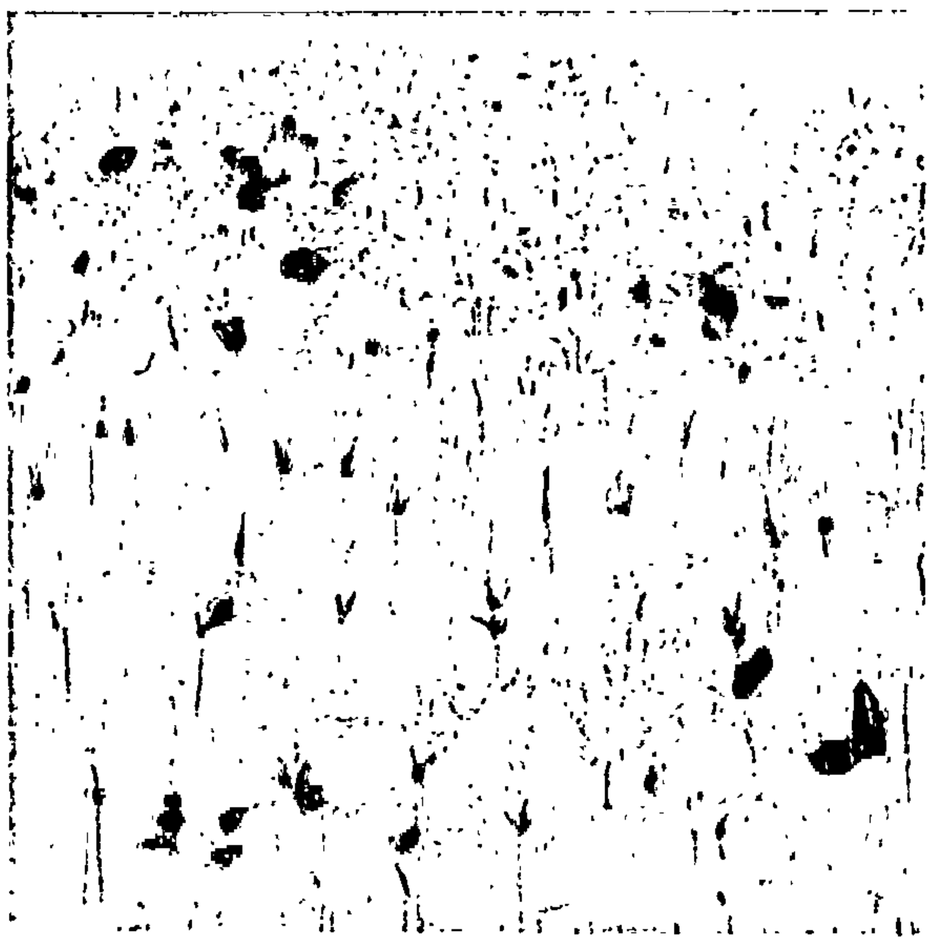
***Two Swallows*, 1981**

Ink and colour on paper

68 cm x 137 cm

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 65-66.

209	8	

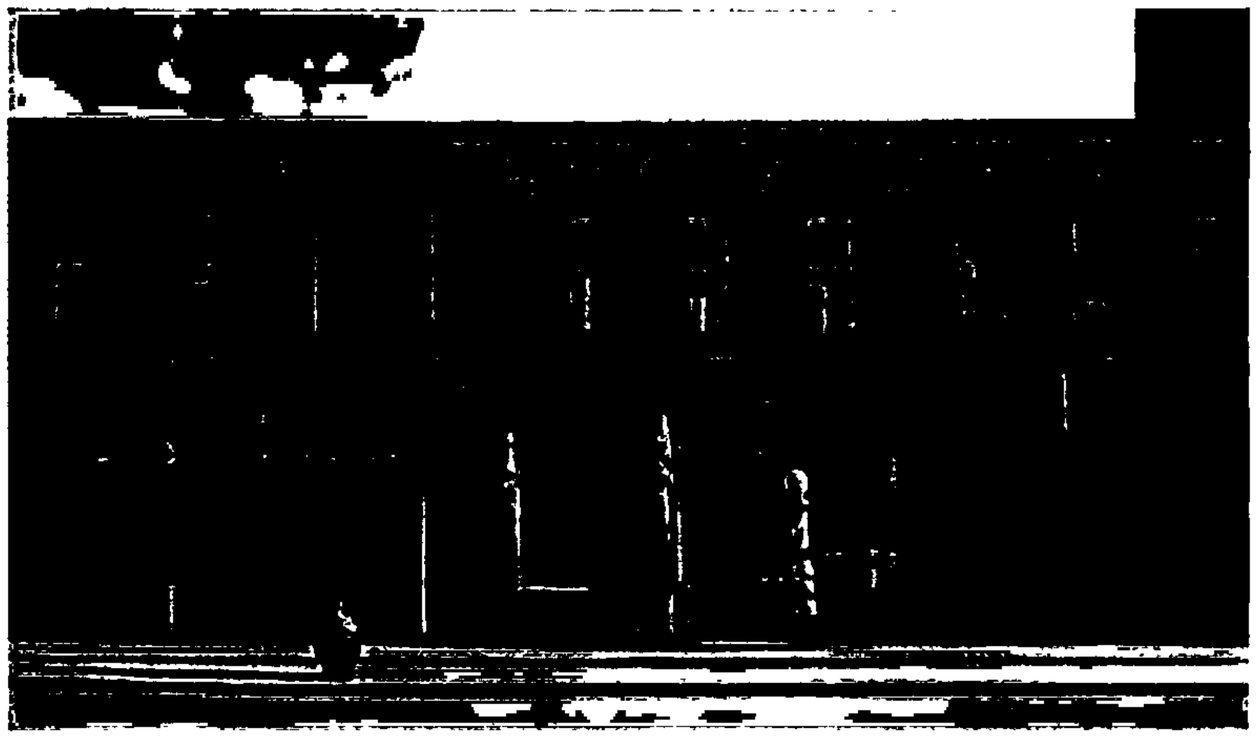
Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

***Green Nursery*, 1977**

Oil on board

44 cm x 66 cm

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 215.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
209, 222	9	 **Zhou Luyun (1924-)** ***Break Through I*** Ink and colour on paper 135 cm x 65.5 cm Hong Kong Museum of Art Reproduced from Hong Kong Museum of Art http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Arts/english/collections/ecollections-db.html
210	10	 **Edward Hopper (1882-1967)** ***Early Sunday Morning*, 1930** Oil on canvas 88.9 cm x 152.4 cm Whitney Museum of American Art, New York Reproduced from Kranzfelder, I. (1988). *Edward Hopper, 1882-1967: Vision of reality.* Köln: Taschen, p. 130-131.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
211	11	

Pierre Bonnard (1867-1947)

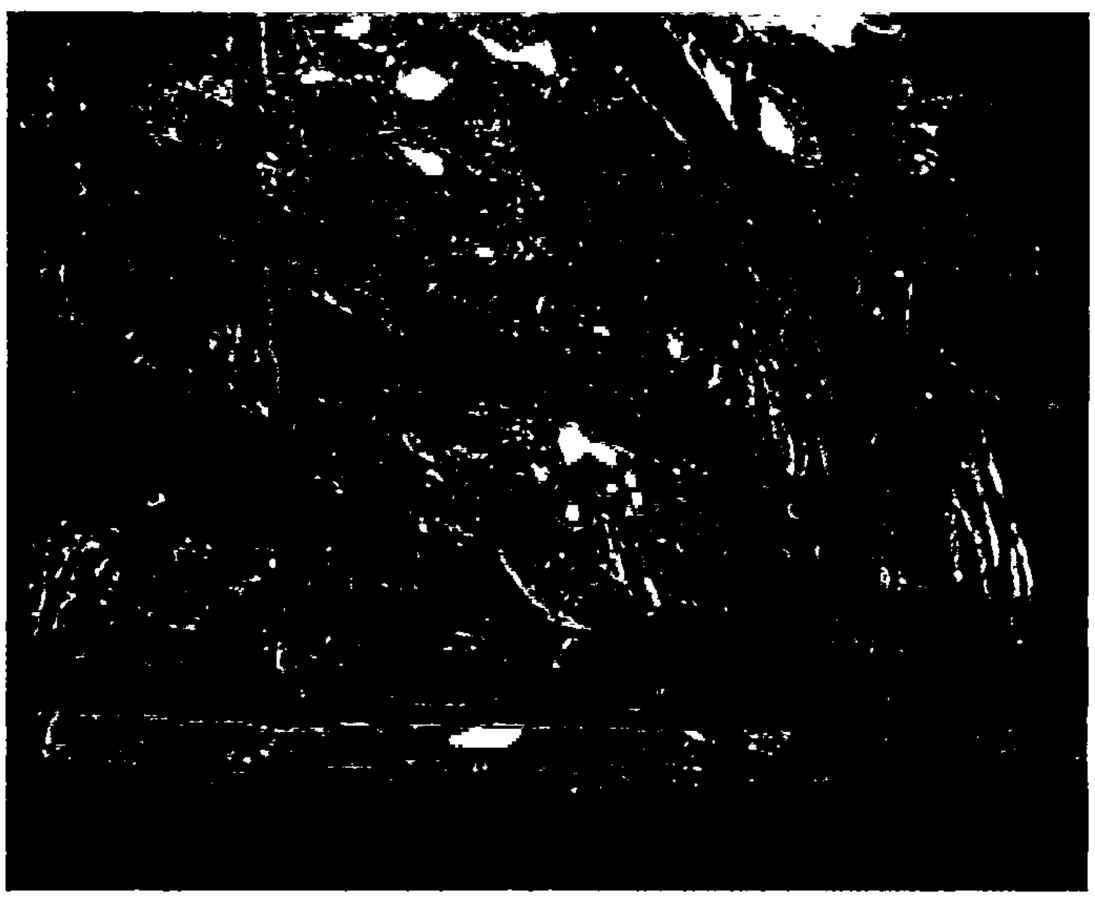
***Young Women in the Garden (Renée Monchaty and Marthe Bonnard)*, 1921**

Oil on canvas

60.5 cm x 77 cm

Private collection, Paris

Reproduced from Watkins, N. (1996). *Bonnard*. London: Phaidon Press, p. 196.

212, 246, 247	12	

Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)

***L'Etang des Soeurs, Osny*, 1875**

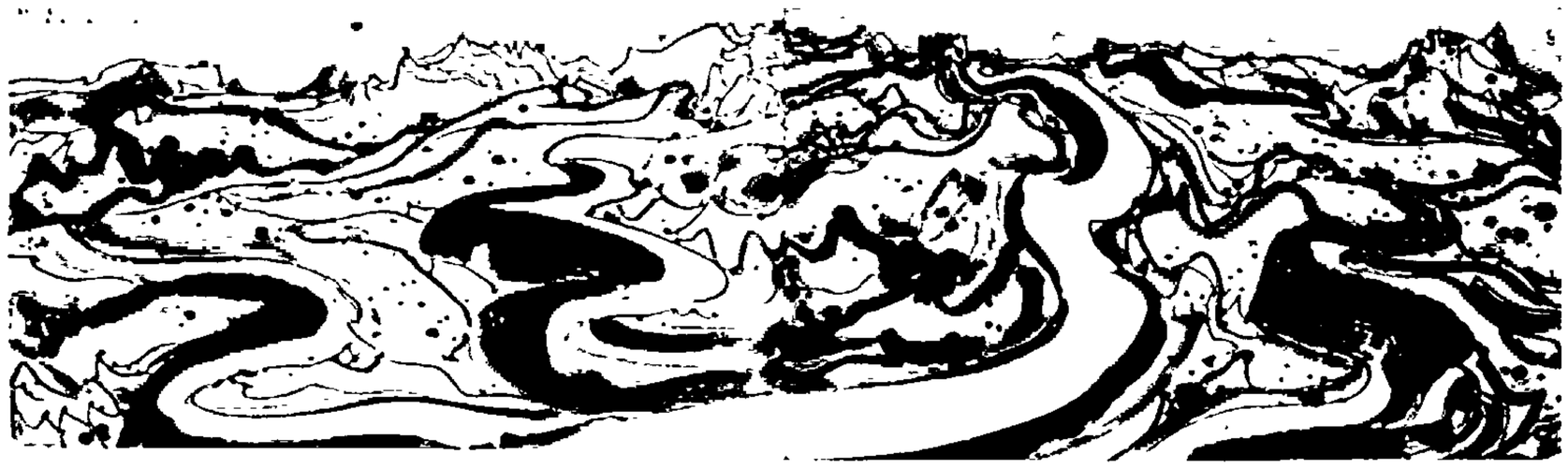
Oil on canvas

60 cm x 73.5 cm

Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London

Reproduced from The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery

http://www.artandarchitecture.org.uk/images/gallery/8dae1f91.html

Page	Painting	Image and Information
212, 223	13	

Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

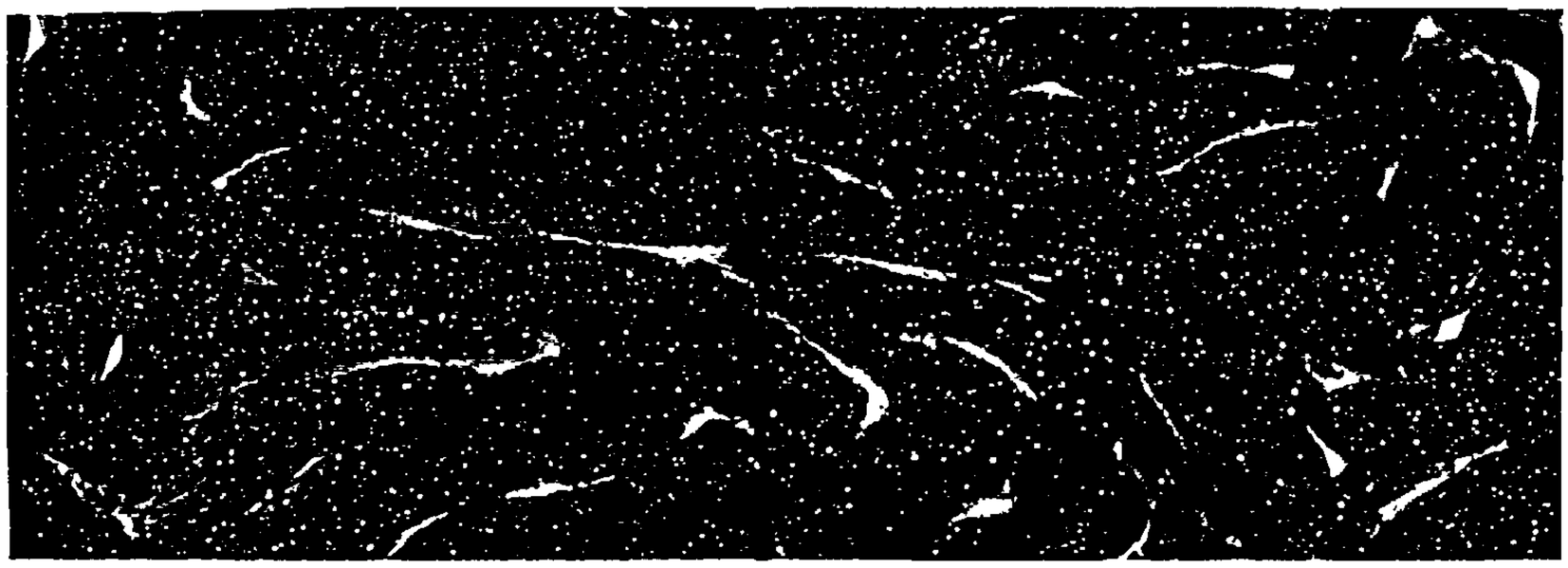
***The Great Wall*, 1988**

Ink and colour on paper

150 cm x 250 cm

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 88-89.

213, 229, 230 — 14



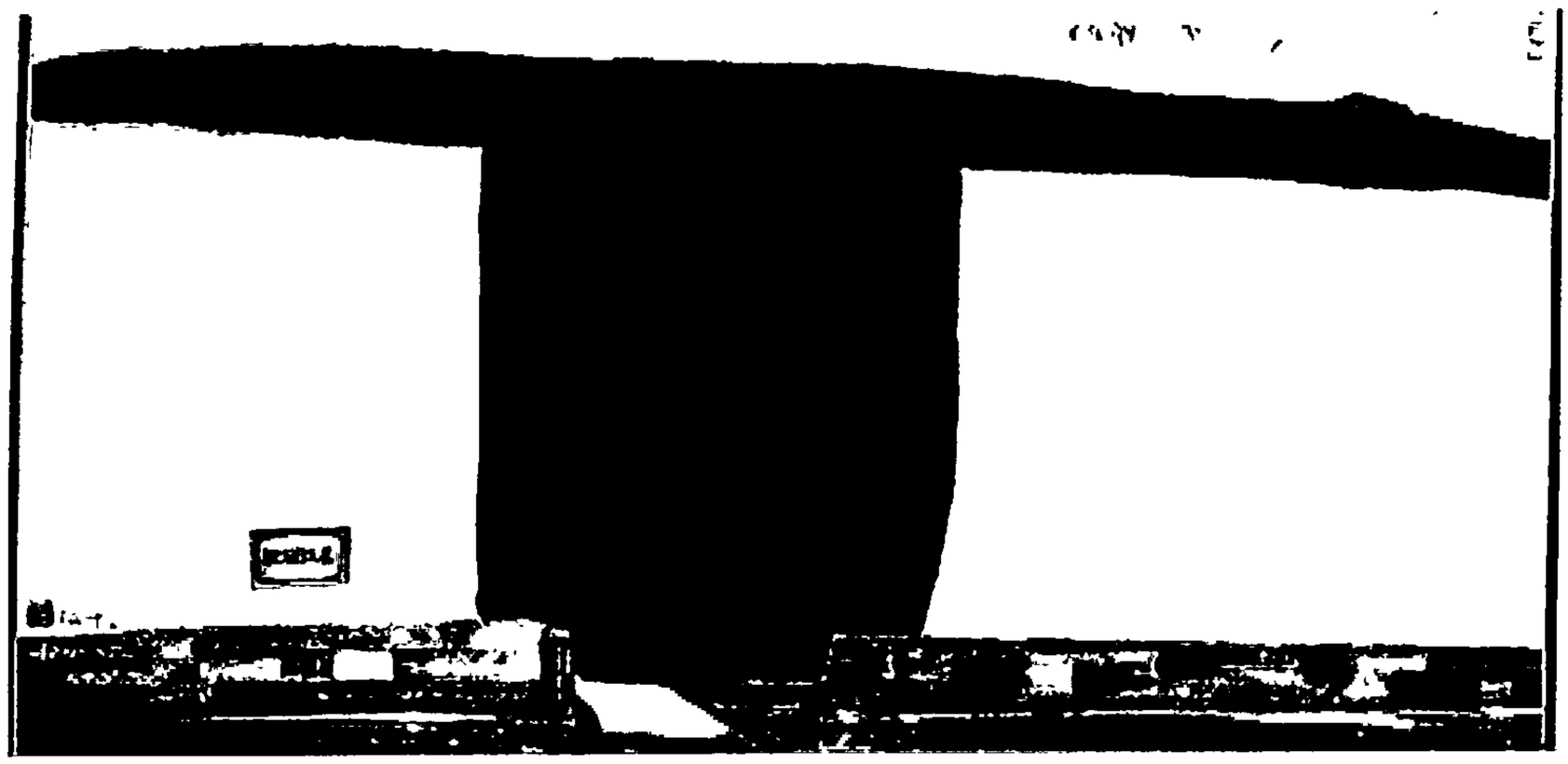
Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

***Blowing in the Wind*, 1992**

Ink and colour on paper

70 cm x 140 cm

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 110-111.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
216	15	

Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

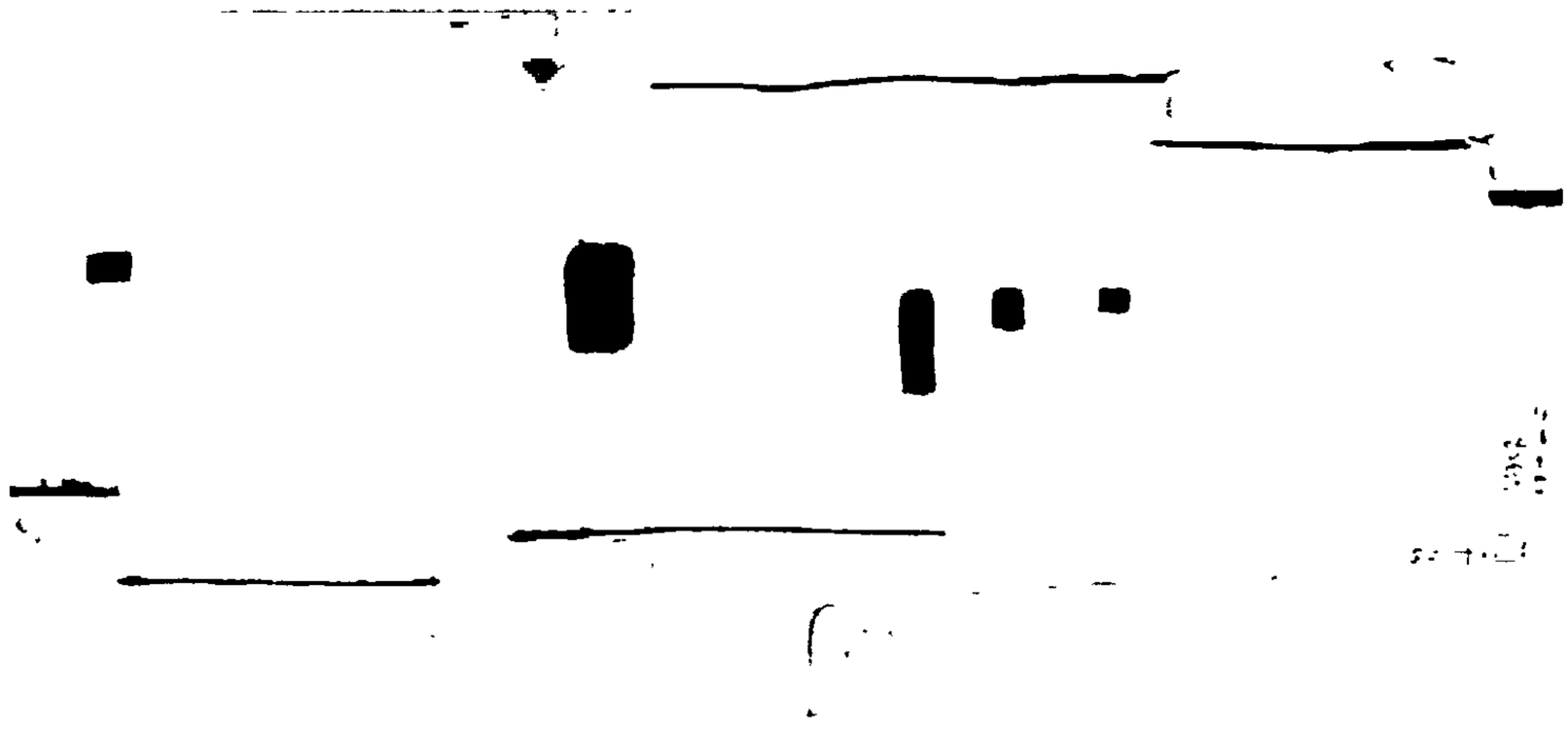
***Former Residence of Qiu Jin*, 1988**

Ink and colour on paper

70 cm x 140 cm

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 84-85.

216, 228	16	

Wu Guanzhong (1919-)

***Reminiscence of Jiangnan*, 1996**

Ink on paper

70 cm x 140 cm

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Reproduced from Wu, G. (2002). *Wu Guanzhong: A retrospective*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, p. 128-129.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
217, 223, 229, 243, 251	17	

Deng Ningzi

***They're Growing up*, 1996**

Mixed media on canvas

159 cm x 206.5 cm

Hong Kong Museum of Art

Reproduced from Hong Kong Museum of Art

http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/Arts/english/collections/ecollections-db.html

218	18	

Rowland Lockey (active ca. 1593-1616)

***Sir Thomas More, his father, his household and his descendants*, 1593**

Oil on canvas

227 cm x 330 cm

National Portrait Gallery, London

Reproduced from Cooper, J. (2000). *National Portrait Gallery: A visitor's guide*. London: National Portrait Gallery, p. 16-17.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
221	19	

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

***Te Rerioa (The Dream)*, 1897**

Oil on canvas

95.1 cm x 130.2 cm

Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London

Reproduced from Hollmann, E. (1996). *Paul Gauguin: Images from the South Seas*. New York: Prestel, p. 76.

221	20	

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

***The Potato Eaters*, 1885**

Oil on Canvas

82 cm x 114 cm

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Reproduced from Nemeczek, A. (1999). *Van Gogh in Arles*. New York: Prestel, p. 21.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
226	21	

Jan van Eyck (1380-1441)

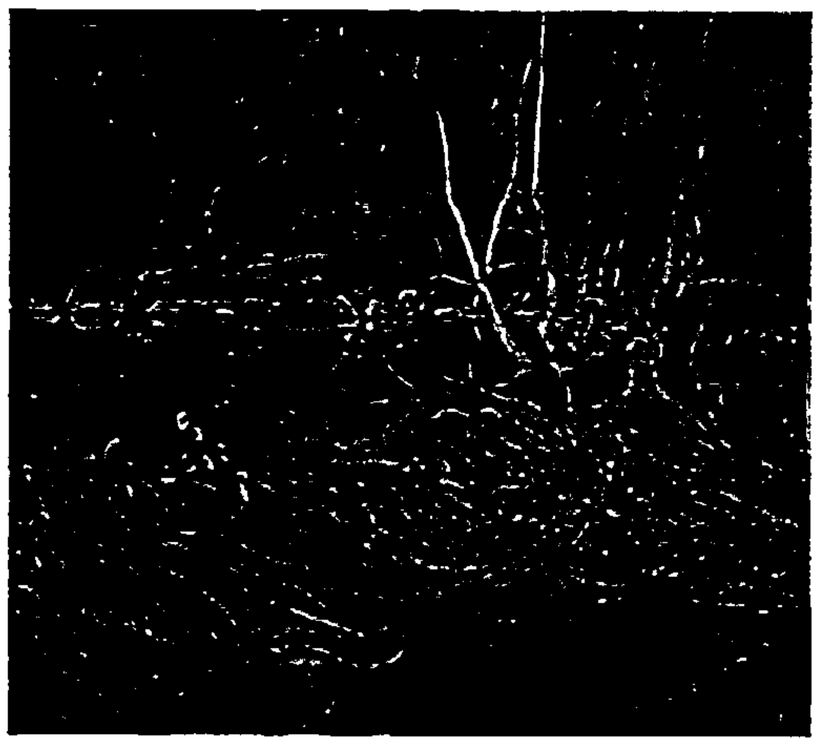
***The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434**

Oil on oak

82.2 cm x 60 cm

National Gallery, London

Reproduced from Till-Holger, B. (2002). *The age of Van Eyck: The Mediterranean world of early Netherlandish painting, 1430-1530*. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 107.

231, 247	22	

J. E. H. MacDonald (1873 – 1932)

***The Beaver Dam*, 1919**

Oil on canvas

81.6 cm x 86.7 cm

Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada

Reproduced from Bert Christensen

http://bertc.com/subthree/macdonald15.htm

Page	Painting	Image and Information
236, 246, 247	23	

Georges Seurat (1859-1891)

***Bathings at Asnières*, 1884**

Oil on canvas

201 cm x 300 cm

National Gallery, London

Reproduced from Courthion, P. (1989). *Seurat*. London: Thames and Hudson, p. 83.

255	24	

Edouard Manet (1832-1883)

***A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1881-82**

Oil on canvas

96 cm x 130 cm

Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London

Reproduced from Rubin, J. H. (1994). *Manet's silence and the poetics of bouquets*.

Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 116.

Page	Painting	Image and Information
256	25	

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)

***Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890**

Oil on canvas

50.5 cm x 103 cm

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

Reproduced from Treble, R. (1989). *The paintings of Van Gogh Vincent*. London: Hamlyn, p. 126.

258	26	

Lenardo da Vinci (1452-1919)

***Mona Lisa*, 1503-1506**

Oil on wood

77 cm x 53 cm

Musée du Louvre, Paris

Reproduced from Letze, O., & Buchsteiner, T. (Eds.) (1997). *Leonardo da Vinci: Scientist, inventor, artist*. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Verlag Gerd Hatje, p. 61.

Appendix 3: Consent Form[1]

Understanding museum visitors' experience of paintings:

A phenomenological study of adult non-art specialists

The following information is provided to help you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are **FREE** to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time.

The aim of this study is to understand museum visitors' experience of paintings. It is a phenomenological study, employing a qualitative method, that seeks to articulate human experience in its natural settings.

Data will be collected through interviews. There will be one or two interviews, each one lasting for approximately one to two hours. The first interview will focus on your recollection of your experience of paintings in a museum. Follow-up interviews will focus on sharing the transcribed interviews and themes developed. The second interview will be conducted after we visit the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Please ask any questions about the study before participating or during the course of participation. I will be happy to share the findings with you after the study is completed. However, your name will not be associated with the findings in any way, and your identity as a participant will be known only to me.

The benefits you may expect to derive from your participation are the experience of reflecting on your own experience of paintings in a museum and the opportunity to participate in a qualitative study. If submitted for publication, your participation will be acknowledged.

Please sign your consent in the full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

Tam Cheung On

The Investigator

Department of Creative Arts and Physical Education, Hong Kong Institute of Education

[1] This consent form is an adaptation of the form designed by Creswell (1998: 116).

Appendix 4: Table Summarizing Details of the Participants

The following table is a summary of the details of the participants:

Name	Age	Sex	Current occupation	Education	Contact
Connie	Between 40 and 45	Female	Housewife Volunteer museum docent	Post-secondary institution	Docent service
Linda	Between 30 and 39	Female	Librarian	Masters graduate	Introduced through a friend
Irene	Between 30 and 39	Female	Student (PhD)	Masters graduate	Course mate
Fred	Between 30 and 39	Male	Primary school teacher	Bachelor graduate	Personal friend
Joe	Between 20 and 29	Male	Student (Masters)	Bachelor graduate	Hall mate
Mandy	Between 20 and 25	Female	Student (Certificate of Education)	Secondary	Student
Yoko	Between 19 and 21	Female	Student (Certificate of Education)	Secondary	Student
Ken	Between 19 and 21	Male	Student (Certificate of Education)	Secondary	Student